

---

*Part Two: Political, Diplomatic and Military Issues*

---

## Thailand and Indochina 1945–1951<sup>1</sup>

---

Eiji Murashima Professor, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University

---

### Introduction

This paper will examine the relations of the Pridi-controlled Free Thai regimes with Indochinese independence movements and the support the Thai government provided to the anti-French struggle that broke out in Indochina following France's sudden return after the war. It will also examine Pridi's concept of a Southeast Asian League and the efforts of his Free Thai regimes to counter French demands for the return of the Indochina territories that the Phibun government had recovered for Thailand in May 1941 with the Treaty of Tokyo, where the Thai had established four new provinces. However after World War Two, the Thai were facing a colonial power, France that was determined to reincorporate these territories into Indochina as part of their intention of re-establishing the *status quo antebellum* in their colony. Then it will examine the attitude of the second Phibun government toward Indochina from the time of the 8 November 1947 *coup d'état*, when the military overthrew the Free Thai government and drove Pridi out of the country, until 1950 and the full-fledged onset of the Cold War.

Thailand's international position after the Second World War was entirely different from what it had been in 1940 when its territorial dispute with Indochina broke out. Although Pridi's Free Thai movement had co-operated with the Allied powers during the war, this did not remove the Allied image of Thailand as an aggressor that had expanded its territory at the expense of its neighbors and had allied itself with Japan. With the end of the war, British troops moved into Thailand to disarm the Japanese forces, and the country found itself placed virtually under British military occupation. It was internationally isolated and treated like a defeated nation. Meanwhile, France was receiving British and American support, and there was no other great power that Thailand could rely on to restrain the French.

The postwar French government did not acknowledge the Vichy interregnum and declared that the state of belligerency since the Thai–Indochina territorial dispute continued to exist between Thailand and France. It demanded the return of the territories that Thailand had acquired in the 1941 Treaty of Tokyo and had reorganized into four new Thai provinces. Having gained the backing of the US and

---

<sup>1</sup> The present article is, by and large a translation of the second half of my article in Japanese, "1940 Nendai Ni Okeru Tai no Shokuminchi Taisei Dakkyakuka to Indoshina no Dokuritsu Undo" [Thailand's role in the breakdown of colonialism and Indo-China's independence movements in the 1940s] in Isobe Keizo ed., *Betonamu to Tai* [Vietnam and Thailand] (Tokyo: Taimeido, 1998). The first half of the Japanese article was published in English as Eiji Murashima, "Opposing French Colonialism: Thailand and the Independence Movements in Indo-China in the early 1940s," *South East Asia Research*, 13, 3 (2005): 333–83.

Britain, on 17 November 1946 France finally succeeded in getting Thailand to accept an agreement resolving the territorial dispute and returning the four provinces to Indochina. However, the agreement also provided for the establishment of an international Commission of Conciliation that would reexamine the territorial issue between the two countries.

Given the difficult international environment that Thailand found itself in after the war, Pridi and his civilian Free Thai government could only adopt one of two approaches for coping with the territorial issue. One was to restore amicable relations with Britain and the US, especially with the latter, to gain support in peace negotiations with France in order to retain at least some portion of the four provinces recovered in 1941. The other approach was to advocate the United Nations principle of national self-determination and demand the independence of Laos and Cambodia inclusive of the four provinces. This second approach formed the basis for Pridi's concept of a Southeast Asian League made up of Thailand and the independent states of Indochina.

Even before the end of the war, Pridi and the other leaders of the Free Thai movement recognized that trying to retain Thailand's territories in Indochina while supporting Indochina's independence did not represent compatible policies. The dilemma they felt came out in a remark by Prime Minister Thamrong Nawasawat, whose cabinet had inherited the policies of the Pridi cabinet. Speaking to the House of Representatives (the lower house of the National Assembly) on 5 November 1947, Thamrong commented,

We were never determined to regain the territories at any cost. Were Laos and Cambodia to become totally independent nations, then what both of them did, and whether they formed a federation with someone else or not would be a problem for the future and for them to decide. Without doubt Thailand would have benefited from the outcome. However, we were not able to state this clearly to the Commission of Conciliation. What I mean is that in the [mediation of the] Franco-Siamese Agreement of Settlement, there was only the choice of leaving unchanged or of revising the [borders in the 1893, 1904, 1907 Franco-Siamese] treaties. Matters that were political issues were outside of the Commission of Conciliation's authority.<sup>2</sup>

The postwar Free Thai regimes under Pridi's control initially pursued the second approach in dealing with the territorial issue, but being unable to obtain US or British support, the Thai government was prevented from bringing its claim before the United Nations. Then after Bangkok found that it would be compelled to retrocede its four Indochinese provinces to France as a condition for setting up

---

<sup>2</sup> *Raingan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon Pho. So. 2490* [Proceedings of 1947 House of Representatives] [henceforth *Raingan 2490*] (1st Regular Session, vol. 2; and 1st Extraordinary Session), pp. 3184–86. Prince Wan recalled that rather than return even a small piece of territory, the Thai government intended to demand the independence of Laos and Cambodia; *Roi pi Phon Tri Phrachao Worawongthoe Krommamun Narathippphongpraphan/The Centennial of H.R.H. Prince Wan Waithayakon...* (Bangkok: Khana Anukammakan Chattham Ekkasan, 1991), p. 120.

the Commission of Conciliation, the Thai government was left with only the first approach. However, in the closing stages of the mediation, when the Thai concluded that the final outcome was not going to be in their favor, they again argued for the principle of national self-determination. Thus after rejecting the mediation proposal, Thailand once again sought to pursue the second approach.

## 1. Postwar Thai Support for the Independence Movements in Indochina

From the time of their territorial dispute with Indochina, the Thai empathized with the anti-French struggle for independence in Indochina, and they saw themselves as comrades with the peoples of Indochina in the fight to rid the region of French colonialism. Thai feelings of solidarity and sympathy expanded all the more rapidly after the war when the French gained British support in the armed suppression of the independence movements, and France openly displayed its intention to take back its colonies in Indochina. After British forces moved into Thailand at the end of the war, they made free and uninvited use of Northeastern Thailand to assist the French military in the latter's return to Indochina. Not only did they allow supplies for the French forces to be shipped to Laos via Thailand's Northeast, but the French were even allowed to launch their reoccupation of Laos from there. Watching this blatant British–French co-operation in the suppression of the Lao Issara and Việt Minh in Laos, it was hardly an exaggeration to say that the people of Northeastern Thailand sympathized with the struggle of their Lao compatriots with whom they shared the same ethnic identity.

### 1.1 Support for the Lao Issara

On 19 August 1945, immediately after the war ended, a five-man team of British soldiers, which included a Lt. Col. Green and a Maj. Peter Kemp, arrived in Sakon Nakhon from India. Sakon Nakhon was a Free Thai base and the hometown of Tiang Sirikhan (1909–1952), a central figure in the Free Thai movement in Northeastern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> The British team immediately received the assistance of Tiang's Free Thai organization and the provincial Governor. From Sakon Nakhon Lt. Col. Green headed for Ubon province while Maj. Kemp went to Nakhon Phanom.<sup>4</sup> Both provinces bordered on the Mekong and had important transportation and communication routes with Laos. The duty of the British team was to overcome any resistance by the Japanese army, secure the safety of Allied prisoners-of-war, and help the French return to Indochina.

In Nakhon Phanom at the end of August, Kemp succeeded in making contact with 1st-Lt. Kolz, a French guerrilla operating across the Mekong in Thakhek. On 7 September Kemp crossed over to Thakhek to provide relief for prisoners-of-war and French families. Thereafter, however, his task and that of other British officers who arrived in the region came to be mainly assisting French guerrillas (which included Prince Boun Oum of Champassak and his followers) in their fight against the Việt

<sup>3</sup> From August 1945 to January 1946 and again from August 1946 to May 1947, Tiang Sirikhan was a Cabinet Minister-without-Portfolio.

<sup>4</sup> National Archives of Thailand (hereafter NAT), So.Ro.0201.37.6/21.

Minh and the Lao Issara. Lt. Kolz was shot and killed by the Việt Minh on the 27th of September.

Meanwhile near the end of the war, Oun Sananikone and other Lao exiles in Thailand organized with US military assistance a Free Lao force which operated as part of Tiang Sirikhan's Northeastern Free Thai organization. Under Oun's command, this 300-man force entered Savannakhet unopposed on 7 September 1945 and took control of the town. But on the 18th of that month the town was attacked by a French-led guerrilla force, and 14 Việt Minh and 2 Lao Issara fighters were killed.

At this point in time the Việt Minh and Lao Issara both had unrealistic expectations of the United States and China. On 18 September a group of US Army officers led by a Maj. Benn arrived from Kunming on a tour of inspection of Nakhon Phanom, Thakhek and Savannakhet. They came with the intention of restraining the fighting that was occurring between the French-led guerrillas and the Việt Minh/Lao Issara. The British expressed displeasure with this US intervention, and on 29 September Lt. Col. Green, as the highest ranking Allied officer in Northeastern Thailand, ordered the US officers to leave. On 1 October, Maj. Benn told the Governor of Nakhon Phanom,

The British are criticizing the US for siding with the Việt Minh and Lao Issara and instigating incidents, but this is contrary to the facts. The US has taken a neutral position and is dealing even-handedly with the situation. The disarming of the Japanese forces in Thailand is the responsibility of the British army, so it is unfortunate, but there is no good way that the US can keep the British in check. When the [Kuomintang] Chinese [occupation] army arrives in Indochina, we will withdraw. We are here only in the position of observers, but we will do the maximum we can.<sup>5</sup>

Benn and his group departed Nakhon Phanom on 6 October and returned to Kunming. That same day at 8 o'clock in the morning, a force of 20 Chinese soldiers arrived in Thakhek from Vientiane. A few days prior to their arrival, some French-led guerrillas with the help of Maj. Kemp had attempted to occupy Thakhek before the Chinese could take over, and this set off a fierce battle with the Việt Minh and Lao Issara.

On 29 September a British aircraft flew over Thakhek and dropped weapons to the pro-French guerrillas, but some of these fell into the hands of the Việt Minh and Lao Issara. To keep supplies and equipment from falling into enemy hands, on 3 October the British began using the Nakhon Phanom airport to drop supplies to the French guerrillas. This meant that Thai territory was being used to suppress the independence movement in Indochina. The Governor of Nakhon Phanom initially opposed the use of his province for transporting weapons to French-led guerrillas across the river, but with Bangkok tacitly accepting the situation, the Governor likewise acquiesced.<sup>6</sup> But the Thai Army handed over to the British military in Thailand a letter of protest dated 8 December 1945. In the letter the Thai side said, "We want to point out that nowhere in the four provisions of the military agreement con-

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

cluded on 8 September 1945 between the Thai military command and the Southeast Asia Command is there anything expressly written that gives the French permission to use Nongkhai and Nakhon Phanom as military bases for their military operations in French-Indochina.” Attached to the letter was a table showing that from 23 September to 12 November, Nongkhai airport across the Mekong from Vientiane had been used six times (23 Sep, 25 Sep, 28 Sep, 30 Sep, 4 Oct, 12 Nov) to drop French paratroopers and weapons; that during the same period, Nakhon Phanom airport had been used for the same purpose five times (3 Oct, 11 Oct, 20 Oct morning, 20 Oct afternoon, 23 Oct); and that weapons had been turned over to the French-led guerrillas in Laos by the British officers Kemp and Winn.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that the Chinese army arrived in Vientiane in the middle of September 1945. They stopped French paratroopers about four kilometers outside of Vientiane and prevented them from entering the city while letting the Lao government under Prime Minister Phetsarath continue to stay in power. Phetsarath’s government had come to power following the Japanese army’s *coup de force* in March, and it remained in control of Vientiane until the Lao Issara government was set up on 12 October 1945. Quickly reviewing the situation in Laos following the Japanese coup, on 5 April Japanese forces occupied the royal capital of Luang Phrabang, and on the 8th of that month King Sisavangvong declared Laos an independent kingdom. As Prime Minister of the newly independent Lao government, Phetsarath ruled from Vientiane, and he continued to maintain his control even after Japan surrendered in August 1945.

When the former French Resident-Superior of Laos tried to resume his duties on 1 September 1945, Phetsarath asserted that the agreements between France and its protectorate of Laos had become null and void with the Japanese *coup de force* in Indochina and the resumption of Lao independence. It was also at this time that Phetsarath advocated to the Nongkhai Governor the concept of a greater Laos that included Northeastern Thailand. Then on 15 September without any consultation with pro-French King Sisavangvong, Prime Minister Phetsarath declared the formation of a unified Kingdom of Laos that included the southern region of the country which until then had been governed as a separate administrative unit. Following this, on 4 October the Prime Minister issued a proclamation calling on the Allied powers to recognize the government of Laos and to guarantee Lao sovereignty and unity. These moves infuriated the French, and on 10 October King Sisavangvong announced in Luang Phrabang that Phetsarath had been dismissed from his positions as Viceroy and Prime Minister.<sup>8</sup>

On 12 October, immediately after Phetsarath’s dismissal, a group led by the Lao Issara that was seeking to create an independent Laos under a constitutional monarchy proclaimed in Vientiane in the name of Phaya Khammao, chairman of the People’s Committee, a 41-article “Lao Issara Constitution.” Two days later, on 14 October, the cabinet ministers of the Issara government were installed with Khammao taking the posts of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. The government’s 11-man cabinet

<sup>7</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/2.

<sup>8</sup> 3349, *Chao Phetcharat Burut Lek Haeng Racha’anachak Lao* [Prince Prince Phetsarath, Iron Man of Laos] (Bangkok: Ruam Mit Thai, 1956), pp. 88 and 119–26.

included Oun Sananikone as Minister of Economic Affairs and Tham Xayasithsena as Deputy Foreign Minister. Both of these men had sought exile in Thailand at the time of the Thai–Indochina territorial dispute in 1940; they co-operated with the Free Thai leaders during the latter part of the war, and they worked to organize the Lao Issara movement. On the 15th of October the new Prime Minister of Laos asked the Governor of Nongkhai to convey to the Thai Foreign Minister a telegram saying in essence that “a revolution has taken place in Laos, and a new government has come into being.”<sup>9</sup> In this way dual governments came into existence in Laos after the war: one in Luang Phrabang which was pro-French and headed by the king, and the other in Vientiane which was for independence and under the control of the Lao Issara.

On 16 October the Prime Minister’s Office of the new Lao Issara regime released the following declaration:

After France lost control over Laos [in March 1945], our beloved country fell into complete disorder. This was because there was no royal personage [*chao nai*] who was able to establish clear and stable rule. Contacts between the provinces became difficult. National finances weakened to the point where officials could not be paid their salaries. We suffered nothing but losses diplomatically, and nothing improved for us militarily. But worse still, the King in Luang Phrabang signed an agreement making Laos [once more] a colony of France. This is against the Lao public will which does not want to be ruled by a foreign country and is demanding only independence. As the representative of all the people of Laos, we the People’s Committee fear that left in its present state, the strength of the country will be broken down leading to the destruction of the nation. Therefore we have come together with the soldiers, officials, the Lao youth and the people in general in concurring to change our system of government from a monarchy to a democracy [constitutional monarchy]. The People’s Committee has drawn up a Constitution that sets down the fundamental principles of the new government. To cope with the tumultuous conditions that are overtaking our country, this Constitution has been set forth as an Interim Constitution. When order has returned to the nation, the people’s representative assembly will appoint a drafting committee draw up a Permanent Constitution. The Interim Constitution is composed of 41 articles. The main articles are concerned with such important matters as the nation’s territory, the authority of the King, the People’s Representative Assembly and the Cabinet, the rights and duties of the Lao people, the relationship of the King as the Head of State with the People’s Representative Assembly and the Cabinet, and the relationship between the Cabinet and the People’s Representative Assembly. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land. Every individual and group is under the authority of the Constitution. The King, the Cabinet, the People’s Representative Assembly, and the people in general must respect and obey the Constitution. Violating the Constitution is absolutely forbid-

---

<sup>9</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/4.

den. However, the Constitution is not immutable and can be amended. The present Interim Constitution has been drafted to cope with the current conditions, and in the future articles that no longer suit the needs of the country can be amended. The Office of the Prime Minister. 16 October 1945.”<sup>10</sup>

There were many politicians native to Northeastern Thailand who participated in or co-operated with the Lao Issara government. Free Thai leaders like Tiang Sirikhan and Thongin Phuriphat (1906–1949) were very much involved. But there were also many non-Free Thai activists like Fong Sitthitham (1904–1981), an influential political leader from Ubon.<sup>11</sup> Siphanom Phichitwarasan (born 1918, elected to the House of Representatives from Sakon Nakhon province in 1979), a Northeastern Thai from Roi Et province who joined the Lao Issara movement, recalled the activities of Fong and other Thai activists in the movement:

The outbreak of the Thai–Indochina territorial dispute really aroused us Isan people [Northeastern Thai], and we really felt a deep sense of sympathy for the struggle of our Læm Thong [“Golden Peninsula,” used to refer to the mainland Southeast Asian region] brothers and sisters to regain their independence. As my teacher, Mr. Fong always told me that the history of Thailand and Laos was inseparable, and as shown by the Srisongrak memorial at Dan Sai, they have always helped each other in time of need. So when Laos is suffering, he would tell me emphatically, we are all caught up together in the same suffering. Mr Fong’s hope was to see his Læm Thong brothers and sisters liberated from the colonial rule of a foreign race. At the end of 1944 before my posting to the Phayap [Northern] Army, when I met him, Mr Fong was sure that Japan would lose the war, and he asked me what would be a way we could help our compatriots in Laos. I told him that since he was a political leader, how about if he went to Vientiane and met with some bigwigs up there. Not long afterwards, in early 1945, through the good offices of Bouachan Inthavong, Mr Fong was able to meet with Savang Vatthana, the Crown Prince of Laos. Mr Fong urged the Crown Prince to get weapons from the Japanese army and lead the people to independence from the French. But the Crown Prince answered most uninspiringly that being a small country with a small population, how could Laos possibly oppose a great power like France after it had decided to come back? Returning disappointed from Vientiane, Mr Fong discussed the situation with Tiang Sirikhan, Thongin Phuriphat, Thawin Udon, and Chamlong Daoruang, four former Thai Cabinet Ministers, and with Phon Saensaradi, a member of the House of Representatives from Khonkhæn province. They decided to help the Lao people organize a Free Lao [*Seri Lao*] movement [separate from the Lao Issara] for the purpose of liberating Laos. So Tiang Sirikhan was not

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Fong was a member of the House of Representatives elected from Ubon province. In 1946 and again in 1948 he was a Minister-without-Portfolio in the Khuang Aphaiwong Cabinet.



only important in the Free Thai, he also played an important role in the initial organizing of the Free Lao movement in Thailand.”<sup>12</sup>

Another Northerner not in the Free Thai who joined the Lao Issara was Amphon Suwannabon (elected to the Thai House of Representatives from Roi Et province in 1952). He had been a middle school teacher, and “as an interpreter for the Japanese army, he traveled all over Læm Thong. He was doing this work in Vientiane when the war ended. Remaining there after the war, he organized a Lao Issara military unit and fought against the French. He was also involved in drafting the Lao constitution.”<sup>13</sup> The Lao Issara constitution had many points of similarity with the Thai June 1932 provisional constitution adopted after the constitutional revolution. This is probably because Thai like Amphon Suwannabon took part in its drafting. The design of the national flag used by the Issara government, which is still the current national flag of Laos, was conceived, according to Siphanom Phichitwarasan, by a number of Lao intellectuals that included Maha Sila Viravong and Amphon Suwannabon. The flag has upper and lower stripes of red separated by a band of navy blue. According to its creators, the central band of navy blue represents the Mekong, and the upper and lower stripes of red stand for the left and right banks of Laos and Northeastern Thailand.<sup>14</sup>

The views of the Lao leadership about the future course of Laos fell into three groups: 1) those who argued for remaining under France, 2) those who argued for merging with or joining in a federation with Thailand, and 3) those who called for a greater Laos. What was the thinking of the Northeastern Thai political leaders who supported and/or joined the Lao Issara? It is not really possible to separate them neatly into supporters of either arguments 2) or 3). Like Phetsarath in Vientiane, their thinking oscillated between the two. Were they to fall under the suspicion of the government in Bangkok, their activities could be seen as encouraging argument 3). As will be discussed later, in November 1948, because of suspicions that a secessionist revolt was being planned in the Northeast, the central government arrested important Northeastern leaders who were involved in the Lao movement for independence. At the same time it is also possible that the Lao leaders native to the left bank of the Mekong were wary of their Northeastern Thai brethren, suspecting them of being Bangkok’s agents for expanding Thailand’s territory. The reason for surmising this is that although Northeastern Thai did important work for the Lao Issara government, none were appointed to any top-ranking positions; their roles were never more than working behind the scenes as advisors.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Cremation Volume for Fong Sitthitham* (in Thai), 1982, pp. 50–55. According to a report by the Governor of Nongkhai, after the *coup de force* in Indochina and King Sisavangvong’s declaration of Lao independence, on 16 April 1945 the Japanese military took Crown Prince Savang Vatthana from Luang Phrabang to Thakhek traveling via Vientiane and Nongkhai. It would seem that Fong met the Crown Prince in Vientiane at that time.

<sup>13</sup> *Issue Commemorating the Opening of the Seri Prachathipatai Party Office* (22 Dec 1955 issue, in Thai).

<sup>14</sup> From the author’s interviews (11 Nov. 1997, 5 Jan. and 18 March 1998) with former Maj. Siphanom Phichitwarasan; elected in 1979 to the House of Representatives from Sakon Nakhon province, he was the leader of a Parliamentary delegation that visited Vietnam in 1983.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Siphanom’s grandfather had migrated from Laos to Northeastern Thailand. His father was engaged in distribution and



The Lao Issara government in Vientiane opposed the French-backed royal government in Luang Phrabang, and the former looked very much to China and the United States for support. On 20 October, Khammao, the Prime Minister of the Lao Issara government, told the People's Representative Assembly about the government's policy to cope with the country's current difficult situation. The policy had four parts, and the one dealing with diplomacy stated that "The government would exert every effort to realize the complete independence of Laos, and it would use every means possible to make contact with the United Nations."<sup>16</sup>

Soon after its establishment, the Lao Issara government also issued a declaration directed at "Lao compatriots, Lao youths, soldiers and government officials, and Vietnamese and Chinese compatriots" in which it explained the reason for the existence of dual governments in Luang Phrabang and Vientiane. The declaration said in part:

We still regard the King [in Luang Phrabang] to be the King of the nation. However, the King is not residing in Vientiane, which is the capital of Laos. Therefore the government [in Vientiane] is ruling provisionally in place of the King. Regarding the Viceroy Phetsarath, we very much venerate His Highness, and in no way are making light of his authority. His Highness has expressed his happiness and satisfaction in assisting us. His Highness has now been divested of his position as Viceroy in the royal government of Luang Phrabang. Hence our actions now are doing no harm either to the King or to the Viceroy.

The declaration also revealed that Prime Minister Khammao had not only long been maintaining secret contacts with China, but had also been maintaining contacts with US military personnel in Thailand, and that those responsible for these particular contacts were also maintaining liaison with the Thai.<sup>17</sup> The declaration stated that the results of the contacts with the American military personnel "have brought us the greatest success. We have received a promise from the US military that they will strive to help us gain the independence of Laos." There were no names provided of the responsible for these contacts, but most likely the central figure would have been the Deputy Foreign Minister, Tham Xayasithsena. Back in 1940 he had gone into exile in Thailand, and as a member of the Lao Issara in the latter part of the war, he had been involved the most in negotiations with the British and Americans.<sup>18</sup> The declaration also expressed an attitude like that of the Thai in saying that, "The Thai and the

---

trade in the Northeast. Siphanom himself studied in Bangkok from the time of middle school, but he strongly identified himself as a Lao and felt an antagonism for the 'Thai' domination of Laos. He joined the Lao Issara and considers himself to be a Lao.

<sup>16</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Siphanom considered that Tham Xayasithsena had the most important role in organizing the Free Lao and should be one of those personages mentioned specifically in Laos's history. Reminiscing about Tham, Siphanom said: "He was the important driving force in organizing the Free Lao. At the time of the Thai-Indochina territorial dispute, he along with Oun Sananikone, Oudone Sananikone, Bouachan Inthavong, Maha Sila Viravong and other activists were the first generation to flee

Laos are one and the same race, and like Thailand, Laos hopes to be free.”

A memorandum dated 29 May 1947 to the Franco-Siamese Commission of Conciliation dealing with Thailand's lost territories (discussed later in this paper), submitted by the Thai government agent (representative), Prince Sakon Worawan (Tiang Sirikhan was deputy agent), contained the comment that “at the end of the war in the Pacific and after the surrender of the Japanese Forces, a Movement called the Free Lao [the Lao Issara] was formed and assisted the Chinese Army in disarming the Japanese troops.”<sup>19</sup> This comment assumes that the Lao Issara was only organized after the war and that it co-operated with the Chinese military. With the Chinese army occupying Laos at that time, maintaining good relations with China would have been one of the greatest concerns of the Issara government. But beyond this, for the sake of its own survival, the regime very much wanted China's support.

In his article, Siphanom Phichitwarasan reported that in early 1946 he visited Vientiane before the city fell to the French:

Amphon Suwannabon [in Vientiane] told me the following good news. He had met with the commander of the Kuomintang's 93rd Division which had come into Laos to disarm the Japanese. The commander showed genuine sincerity for the recovery of Laos's independence. He talked about the long history of close relations between China and Laos, and then after saying Laos should fight untiringly and unceasingly to regain its independence, the commander expressed the following opinion. He said that Laos had once been a great nation, and there were more than a few Lao people living in Yunnan province. If unification was what the Lao people desired, on the morning after the French had been driven out, China would present those lands and their people to the country of Laos. China would do this without grudge or refusal, so the commander urged Laos to do all that it could to first achieve its independence. If this could not be achieved now, then an idea would be to send people to the 93rd Division's base in Yunnan for combat training. After building up its military power, Laos could fight until winning independence. Amphon Suwannabon then took me to meet with Prime Minister Khammao. We decided that if it was not possible to keep control of Vientiane, everyone would move across to Thailand, and from there we would consider how to carry on fighting until achieving independence. Not long afterwards, Vien-

---

across the Mekong River to escape the brutal rule of the French. As representative of the movement to recover Lao independence, he had a conference with Tiang Sirikhan and officers from Britain and the US in the Dong Phrachao forest near Nong Luang village in Sawang Daendin district of Sakon Nakhon, where an important Free Thai base in Northeastern Thailand was located. At that conference he was given the political and military authority to organize the Free Lao, and he was dispatched to Vientiane. This was later changed to the Lao Issara, and it succeeded in liberating Laos from the yoke of the French” (*Creation Volume for Fong Sitthitham*, p. 51). Oun Sananikone also wrote that Tham Xayasithsena along with Oun himself had been part of the Free Thai in Northeastern Thailand at the end of World War II, and that Tham had received assistance from the US and had the most important role in organizing a Lao anti-Japanese force (the Free Lao); Oun Sananikone, *Lao Issara: The Memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, tr. John B. Murdoch and ed. David Wyatt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Studies Program, 1975), p. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Publicity Department, *Khamplae Raigan khong Khana Kamamkan Kanpranom Farangset-Thai* [Translation of the report of the Franco-Siamese Commission of Conciliation], Bangkok, 1947, p. 79.

tiane was lost [during the French reoccupation], and the Lao Issara government moved to Nongkhai.<sup>20</sup>

Tiang Sirikhan and other Free Thai members provided the Lao Issara with weapons to carry on their fight. Other assistance coming from Thailand can be inferred from a note dated 23 February 1946 from Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Sinatyotharak to the Army, Navy and Air Force which stated that

In the fight for independence in the French territory of Laos, the groups fighting to regain independence are asking for weapons and manpower from Thailand. The people of Laos and Thailand are not only of the same blood, but they also share a common border and cross back and forth in a mutual and intimate relationship. Therefore, out of sympathy it is possible as individuals to provide assistance. Each individual can, of course, use his own discretion when offering assistance. Individuals can also hire themselves out to the Lao Issara. However, within the government, soldiers and civilian officials must remain neutral.<sup>21</sup>

The gist of this note is that it was permissible for private individuals to assist the Lao Issara in their fight for independence, but people in government service had to maintain strict neutrality out of consideration for Thailand's foreign relations. But as will be shown later in this section, the Free Thai regimes under Pridi's leadership not only gave tacit approval to the activities of the Indochinese liberation movements on Thai territory, but also covertly gave them active assistance. Pridi also used Tiang Sirikhan's connections to have Wong Phonninon,<sup>22</sup> a Free Thai member from Nongkhai, dispatched as an economic advisor to the Issara government in Vientiane. Wong remained there until 24 April 1946, when the city fell to French forces. He left together with the principal members of the Issara regime who moved into exile in Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

As French forces gradually pressed in on Vientiane, from 24 March onward the number of Vietnamese and other refugees fleeing across the river to Nongkhai increased rapidly. Pakon Angsusing, the Governor of Nongkhai, reported that "according to the leader of the Vietnamese community, the number of Vietnamese moving into Nongkhai will reach 20 thousand."<sup>24</sup> Vietnamese evacuees from Laos in this period were called "*Yuan opphayop*" (Vietnamese evacuees). On 24 April 1946, Vientiane finally fell, and the Lao Issara government moved to Nongkhai and then to Bangkok. Having retaken Laos, France eyed its next target: taking back the four provinces that Thailand had acquired in the territorial

<sup>20</sup> *Cremation Volume for Fong Sitthitham*, pp. 50–55.

<sup>21</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/6.

<sup>22</sup> Born in 1919, Wong Phonninon received an M.A. in Economics from Thammasat University and worked as a section chief in the Ministry of Commerce. He became an Under-Secretary in the Foreign Ministry in 1976, and in 1977 as Deputy Foreign Minister in the Kriangsak Cabinet, he improved Thailand's relations with Vietnam.

<sup>23</sup> Wong Phonninon interview.

<sup>24</sup> Report Ti.1396/2489 dated 29 Mar 1946, "Immigration of Indochinese Inhabitants to Thailand," from the Governor of Nongkhai to the Under-Secretary of Interior Ministry (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11).

dispute with Indochina. As a result tension between Thailand and France quickly rose.

## 1.2 Support for Việt Minh

Information about the Việt Minh following the Japanese coup de force in March 1945 can be gleaned from Thai official documents. One example is a report dated 14 March 1945 from Thawin Sunthonsanthun, the Governor of Nakhon Phanom, about the post-*coup de force* situation in Thakhek on the opposite bank of the Mekong. The report said:

The Japanese army is calling for the Lao and Vietnamese officials to return to their work places. They are presently appointing officials, but most of them are Vietnamese... I have heard from a number of reliable Vietnamese sources that the Vietnamese do not want to remain under either France or Japan. They are demanding independence. Thus they are not fighting to help the French drive out the Japanese. At the same time, however, it is doubtful that they would be able to achieve independence even if they co-operated with the Japanese. Therefore they are waiting for the support of China and the US, and they are waiting for the opportunity to do like French forces did when they rose up and drove out the Germans at the time the US landed on the Continent.<sup>25</sup>

After Japan's defeat, the Governors of Nakhon Phanom and Nongkhai sent in detailed reports on the movements of the Việt Minh on the Lao side of the river, but the reports did not use the term "Việt Minh." Instead they were referred to as the "*Yuan Issara*" (Yuan being the Thai term for Vietnam/Vietnamese) or simply as "*Vietnam* [ese]." The first use of the term "Việt Minh" in an official Thai document was in a message dated 17 December 1945 from the Governor of Battambang province to the Thai Interior Minister. In his message the Governor wrote:

I learned the following in a conversation with a number of Việt Minh committee members. 1) The Việt Minh are unchanged in their determination to win independence; they will fight against the French with absolute dauntlessness. They are inferior to the French in weaponry, but despite this inferiority, they will continue to fight a guerrilla war. 2) The Việt Minh will not negotiate with France as long as the French do not affirm the principle of giving Vietnam independence. 3) The French Saigon radio station is broadcasting that the French have won and calm has largely returned, but this is contrary to fact. Fierce fighting continues in any number of places, and the French have suffered heavy losses. 4) The Việt Minh have insufficient funds and weapons. They have received some assistance from the Japanese army. The Thai border has jungle areas that are out of sight of the French, so they are asking for assistance from Thailand too. 5) The Việt Minh believe completely that they will succeed in their plan for independence. 6) This group [Việt

---

<sup>25</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.98.1/19.

Minh] adheres more to Russia and China than to the US or Britain. They detest the British. 7) The Việt Minh has closer, more co-operative relations with the Lao Issara than with the Khmer Issarak. Until now the Khmer thinking has been that upon achieving victory, the Yuan would take control of Cambodia; but now both sides have come to understand each other and have begun to co-operate. The Yuan are critical of the Khmer for their lack of strong leadership and firm spirit. They are fighting guerilla-type warfare in southern Vietnam and Cambodia. 8) After winning they [Việt Minh and Khmer] plan to declare each of their countries independent or form a confederation. 9) They [Việt Minh] have promised to provide us with intelligence on the French that is useful to Thailand. 10) In the event of an unavoidable clash with the French, we may be able to receive assistance from this group [Việt Minh]. If we have the weapons, it would be good to provide them with these.<sup>26</sup>

At that time Battambang was still under Thai government control, and the French were demanding its return. The noteworthy point in the Governor's message was that should a clash with the French over the lost territories become unavoidable, the Thai could look to the Việt Minh for assistance, and in his opinion the Thai should help the Việt Minh by providing weapons. It needs to be remembered that Battambang at this time was a base area for the Việt Minh, and Trần Văn Giàu was a Việt Minh leader operating in the province. Such factors also likely influenced the Governor's opinion.

Pridi Phanomyong did, in fact, supply the Việt Minh in Battambang with weapons. Many years later, in a 1973 recollection of that time immediately after the war, Pridi commented:

From the end of the war, the Vietnamese patriots came and asked us to supply them with weapons. I gave them some of the Free Thai's weapons. Luang Sangwonyutthakit, commander of the Military Police, had his MPs supervise the shipment of those weapons by rail to the border of Battambang which was Thai territory at that time. I received a letter of gratitude from Hồ Chí Minh in which he wrote that with those weapons they had been able to organize two battalions of patriotic military units, and to commemorate this, they had honored Siam<sup>27</sup> by christening these units the "Battalions from Siam."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/21; (3) So.Ro.0201.9/3, p. 48. The Cabinet Secretary, Thawi Bunyaket, reported this telegram to Prime Minister Seni Pramot on 19 December 1945.

<sup>27</sup> "Siam" was Pridi's preferred name for Thailand. During the time of the Free Thai regimes after the war when Pridi held sway, the country reverted to using the name "Siam." Following the November 1947 coup and the return of the military to power, the name was changed again to "Thailand."

<sup>28</sup> *Cremation Volume for Rear Admiral Luang Sangwonyutthakit* (in Thai), 1973, pp. 14–15. According to Suphot Dantrakul, the person in charge of shipping the weapons to the Việt Minh was Naval Lieutenant Phonglert Srisuknan (Author's interview with Suphot Dantrakul, 6 Aug 1997). Pridi died in Paris in 1983, but on his behalf for his contribution to the recovery of Vietnam's independence, the Vietnamese government on 30 August 1995 conferred upon his wife, Phunsuk, a medal of friendship. On 14 October 1998 the government of Laos did likewise when they presented Phunsuk with a decoration of friendship. (Author's interview with Wani Saipradit, daughter of Pridi and Phunsuk Phanomyong, 12 Oct. 1998).

Pridi and the Free Thai regimes covertly but actively supported the Việt Minh, and after the war Thailand was the largest base outside of Indochina that the Việt Minh relied on. This came out clearly in a document dated 26 August 1947 that Foreign Minister Atthakit Phanomyong sent to the Chief Cabinet Secretary which reported on a *tête-à-tête* conversation that the Thai Consul General in Singapore had with Nguyễn Ngọc, the Việt Minh public relations official in the colony. The document reported that according to Ngọc,

There are about 10 thousand *phuak Vietnam* [Vietnamese partisans, i.e. Việt Minh] in Vietnam. They want to express their appreciation for the secret co-operation and assistance from the Kingdom of Thailand. China is in the midst of a civil war, so the Việt Minh cannot rely on assistance from that country. The Việt Minh expect that the only country they will be able to rely on is Thailand. The Việt Minh are using the areas where they are living in Thailand as centers which Việt Minh throughout the world can contact."<sup>29</sup>

The Consul General also reported that the Việt Minh in Singapore were receiving the co-operation and assistance of the Chinese Consulate General in that city.

On Bangkok's Silom Road the Việt Minh set up the office of what was officially called the Vietnam Government Delegation to South East Asia.<sup>30</sup> The precise date that this body was established is not known, but it was reported that the president of the delegation, Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh, arrived in Bangkok and began operations in 1946<sup>31</sup>; thus it can be inferred that the delegation was also established in 1946. At the same location as the delegation's office, the Việt Minh set up the Vietnam News Service. They also set up a Thai-Vietnamese bilingual newspaper, *Khaw Vietnam/Tin Việt Nam*<sup>32</sup> (Vietnam News) which began publishing in Bangkok on 23 June 1946.

## 2. Returning the Four Provinces to France

Like the Phibun government that had acquired the territories, the Pridi-dominated Free Thai governments that took control of Thailand after July 1944 regarded the two provinces in Laos and the two in Cambodia that had been recovered from French-Indochina in 1941 as belonging rightfully to Thailand. In July 1945 under the premiership of Khuang Aphaiwong, elections for the Thai House of Representatives were held for the first time in the four provinces. Elections were held again in January 1946 during Seni Pramoet's term as Prime Minister, and they were held again in August 1946 while Pridi himself was Prime Minister. One reason for holding these elections was to demonstrate to the United Nations that government in the four provinces was being conducted based on the popular will of

---

<sup>29</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.9.3/32.

<sup>30</sup> NAT, So.Ro.2021.37.6/11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> The paper's publisher was "Sutchai Charoenchat," the Thai name of Trần Văn Giàu, who also went by the name of Bamrung Charoenchat.

the people, which gave Bangkok grounds for rejecting French demands for their return.

With the conclusion of the Treaty of Tokyo on 9 May 1941, peaceful relations had been restored between the Thai and Vichy French governments, and diplomatic relations between the two countries remained peaceful for the duration of the war. But after the war the De Gaulle government refused to recognize the Vichy interregnum. It argued that the state of hostilities between Thailand and French-Indochina since their border dispute still continued, and with much indignation demanded that Thailand return the Indochinese territories that it was occupying. The British were in complete support of France's demands.<sup>33</sup> In September 1945 Bangkok sent a representative to Kandy, Ceylon to discuss the termination of the state of war between Britain and Thailand. At that time the French representative met the Thai representative and presented him with an official document that the French requested be delivered to Pridi Phanomyong, the Regent for the young King Ananda Mahidol. The document stated that "France regards a state of hostility as still existing between itself and Thailand. France is ready to discuss the restoration of relations based on the principle of a return to conditions prior to June 1940." The French representative told his Thai counterpart that France was demanding the retrocession of the territories that Thailand had gained in 1941 and also the return of the Emerald Buddha. (The Thai had brought this statue to Bangkok from Vientiane following a military campaign in Laos in the late 18th century. It is regarded as the guardian Buddha of the Thai state and plays a vital role in the rituals and functions of the Thai royal house but is viewed by many Lao as rightfully theirs). The first demand had been expected, but the latter was completely out of the blue, and the Thai government did not even give it serious consideration.<sup>34</sup>

The French were not alone in demanding that the territorial situation be returned to its prewar condition; the British and Americans were demanding the same. Lacking any support for their position, the Thai realized soon after the war ended that they could not continue to reject the demands to give back the territories. But they also saw that negotiating a settlement directly with the French would simply mean returning all of the disputed territories back to colonial rule. Therefore the Thai sought to follow another approach which they hoped would bring a solution to the colonial problem, namely to bring the territorial issue before the United Nations in accordance with the provisions of the UN Charter. In order for Thailand to join the United Nations, it needed the approval of France which was a permanent member of the Security Council, but it could not get this approval until the territorial issue had been settled.<sup>35</sup> However, the Charter also contained provisions that allowed non-member states to

<sup>33</sup> Foreign Minister Direk Chainam's explanation to the National Assembly on 14 October 1946 (*Raingan Kanprachum Ruamkan khong Ratthasapha Pho. So. 2489–90* [Proceedings of the 1946–1947 Sessions of the Joint Sittings of the National Assembly] [henceforth *Raingan 2489–90*], p. 190).

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Minister Direk Chainam's explanation to the National Assembly on 17 June 1946 (*ibid.*, pp. 82–84). It would seem that the demand for the Emerald Buddha was a negotiating tactic on the part of the French and not a serious demand. Had it been fulfilled, it would have had a dramatic effect of alienating the Thai from the Laos and of impressing the Lao people with the power of France. Probably because of strong Thai objections, this demand was never presented again.

<sup>35</sup> The UN General Assembly approved Thailand's membership on 15 December 1946 following the conclusion of the territorial dispute with the Franco-Siamese Agreement of Settlement.



bring appeals before the United Nations.

By appealing to the UN, the Thai were hoping for several things. Were the international body to decide to return the territories to France, the Thai leadership had less to fear from a strong unpopular domestic reaction because it would have been a decision made by the UN. But there was the hope that the UN might decide to apply the Charter's principle of self-determination to the territories, which would then put the issue to a vote of the local inhabitants. This offered the chance of a vote to remain with Thailand. But even if the vote were against staying with Thailand—if it were one for independence—this would be a demand for the end of colonial rule in Indochina which had been Thailand's noble cause since its territorial dispute with Indochina and which the people of Thailand supported.

An indication that the leadership was following this line of thought came in an explanation from Pridi, now Prime Minister, to the National Assembly on 17 June 1946:

We began by declaring peace on 16 Aug. 1945 and trying to get them to recognize that we had no responsibility for the war. They strongly demanded that we declare our stance on the territories, so the Khuang government came to me; I was then Regent; and asked me for permission to make a declaration. We then declared that we would accept the judgment of the United Nations. In negotiations with the British in Singapore for an agreement to terminate the war, when the agreement was concluded, the British said clearly in the document that they did not recognize Thailand's claim because the territories had been obtained using the power of an Axis country. We made all possible effort to have this issue referred to an international organization. Our intention was not just to have the four provinces but to have all of the territories that France had taken away from us referred to an international organization for judgment.<sup>36</sup>

While the French were demanding direct negotiations, the Thai were attempting to prolong the situation. On 27 December 1945 Prime Minister Seni Pramot presented a plan to Charlie Yost, the American Chargé d'Affaires. The plan said that the Thai government would declare that it had had nothing to do with the territories that Phibun had acquired by co-operating with the Japanese, and would request that the territories in question be put under provisional international control. Seni asked Yost whether or not the US would agree. In response to France's demands for negotiations, on 2 April 1946 the Pridi government dispatched a delegation to Saigon to hold working-level consultations. The Thai put forward three proposals and asked the French to make a choice: 1) take the issue to the United Nations; 2) put it to a vote of the local inhabitants; 3) Thailand would temporarily give back the territories, but in return for rice that Thailand would provide to France, the French would then permanently retrocede the territories to Thailand. The French rejected all three options.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 104–105 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> Konthi Suphamongkhon, *Kanwithesobai khong Thai Pho. So. 2483–2495* [Thai Foreign Policy, 1940–1952] (Bangkok, Thammasat, 1994), pp. 271–74.

On 24 April 1946 Vientiane fell to French forces, and the Lao Issara government fled to Thailand. After recapturing Laos, tensions between Thailand and France rose quickly as the French military eyed their next target: the four Thai provinces that had been part of Indochina. On 6 and 7 April French forces made attacks on Nakhon Phanom. Then on the 26th up to two companies of French troops crossed the Mekong and occupied Tha Bo district in Nongkhai province for several hours (It should be noted that neither Nakhon Phanom nor Nongkhai were part of the disputed territories taken from Indochina). Calling these incidents a grave violation of Thai sovereignty, the Bangkok government held consultations with the British Minister and the American Chargé d'Affaires. Pridi sent telegrams to the four permanent members of the UN Security Council (excluding France) appealing for their support. He also sent a telegram to Herbert Hoover, the former US President who was head of the World Food Procurement Organization, telling him that France's actions would affect Thailand's ability to supply the rice that it was required to provide to the world.<sup>38</sup>

Pridi then made the decision to use these incidents for an appeal to the UN under the provisions of Article 35, Clause 2 of the Charter of the United Nations which stated that “a state which is not a Member of the United Nations may bring to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly any dispute to which it is a party if it accepts in advance, for the purposes of the dispute, the obligations of pacific settlement provided in the present Charter.” Under the assumption that accepting “the obligations of pacific settlement” as required by the UN Charter would entail a change of territory, the Pridi cabinet on 17 June asked a joint meeting of both National Assembly chambers to approve the government's proposal of bringing the issue before the United Nations. This was approved by a vote of 122 to 4. The Prime Minister then called for everyone's support, telling the Assembly, “this problem is the whole country's problem. It is not the government's problem or the opposition party's problem. So I also want Khuang, the leader of the opposition party, to participate in the negotiations for appealing to the UN.”<sup>39</sup> Khuang, the former Prime Minister, responded by accepting to be the deputy leader of the government's delegation; Prince Wan Waithayakon was appointed leader.

On 3 August 1946, as the Thai delegation to the UN was preparing to depart, the American Minister to Thailand came to Pridi with a French proposal that had come via the US State Department. The French government wanted to ask the International Court of Justice to judge whether or not the 9 May 1941 Treaty of Tokyo and Thailand's acquisition of Indochinese territory had been legally valid, and therefore the French wanted the Thai to withdraw their appeal to the UN. The opinion of the US State Department was that the French proposal was not a matter for Thailand and France to settle just between themselves; it fell within the UN's framework for settling disputes, which was what Thailand wanted; therefore the US asked Thailand to accept the French proposal. The Thai government and the delegation to the UN studied the proposal as well as the accompanying Department of State opinion

<sup>38</sup> Foreign Minister Direk Chainam's explanation to the National Assembly on 13 June 1946 (*Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 21–24).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105. In April 1946 Khuang and former Prime Minister Seni Pramot formed the Democratic Party in opposition to Pridi's Cabinet.

and decided to accept.

The Bangkok government gave the delegation all powers to carry on activities at the International Court of Justice,<sup>40</sup> which was an organization belonging to the United Nations. Just at that time, however, on 7 August 1946 attacks by Khmer Issarak revolutionaries occurred in the Cambodian province of Siem Reap.<sup>41</sup> The French accused Thai of crossing the border illegally and participating in the attacks and claimed that armed units trained by the Thai government had also been involved. The French reacted by unilaterally withdrawing its proposal to seek settlement at the International Court of Justice. After arriving in the US the Thai delegation at the end of August discussed a course of action with the American government, but the Deputy Secretary of State told Prince Wan that since the French had unilaterally withdrawn their proposal, there was nothing more the US could do, and he advised the Thai to enter into direct negotiations with the French. The French dispatched G. Georges Picot, who had been the French Chargé d'Affaires in Thailand in 1937. He entered into informal negotiations with the Thai delegation asking that a Thai representative visit France. It was decided that Khuang would visit France on 7 September 1946.<sup>42</sup>

In Paris the French government handed to Khuang a new proposal to be the basis for the direct negotiations between the two countries. At the same time the proposal was sent via the US State Department to Prince Wan and the Thai delegation. The essential points of the proposal were that:

1) Thailand would recognize the invalidity of the 9 May 1941 Treaty of Tokyo and turn over the Indochina territories to French control so that France could transfer them to the Cambodian and Lao governments;

2) the status quo would be restored; the formerly existing diplomatic relations would be re-established after the state of war between France and Thailand had been settled; and the 7 December 1937 treaty of friendship, trade and navigation would be applied in relations between the two countries; Thailand would withdraw its appeal to the UN Security Council, and France for its part would not oppose Thailand's entry into the United Nations,

3) Thailand would declare the invalidity of the Treaty of Tokyo; at the same time France would approve the establishment of a Commission of Conciliation (composed of one member from each of the interested countries and three members from neutral countries forming a total of five members) in accordance with the General Protocol for the Peaceful Resolution of International Disputes adopted on 26 September 1928 by the General Assembly of the League of Nations and which was set forth in Article 21 of the 1937 treaty of friendship, trade and navigation. The Commission of Conciliation would

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187–188.

<sup>41</sup> The Thai Governor of Phibunsongkhram province reported that on 7 August 1946 the Khmer Issarak attempted to start a revolution in the Cambodian province of Siem Reap. They opened jails and gave weapons to the political prisoners. (NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/3, p. 131).

<sup>42</sup> Foreign Minister Direk Chainam's explanation to the National Assembly on 14 October 1946, *Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 186–91; also M.R. Noppakaew Nawarat, *Si Changwat Daen Phipat* [The four contested provinces] (Bangkok: Warasap, 1946), pp. 28–39.

start working immediately after the territories had been returned to Indochina. It would examine and consider on ethnic, geographical and economic grounds the arguments of both concerned parties as to whether the stipulations concerning territory in the 23 March 1907 Franco-Siamese treaty (which had made the final adjustments to the border between Siam and French Indochina) should be revised or left unchanged.

On 4 October 1946 the Department of State sent a memorandum to the Thai delegation saying that the US government could not recognize the territories that Bangkok had acquired from Indochina in 1941, that Thailand should restore the *status quo ante*, and that the US supported the French proposal. But the memorandum also said that Washington “has consistently requested of the French government that when Thailand has returned the territories, the French government promise to give Thailand the opportunity to ask for the peaceful revision of the border or transfer of territorial jurisdiction.” This suggested that US pressure was also behind the French proposal for examining the ethnic, geographic and economic aspects of the issue, and this suggestion gave the Thai hope for a future re-retrocession of territory. The consensus of the delegation was that even the most concerted Thai effort to appeal to the Security Council would be vetoed by the French; and if by some remote chance France did yield to a majority, it would sour relations between Paris and Bangkok for a long time to come. Meanwhile, Britain and the US, the two great powers on whom the Thai had hoped to rely on for support, were asking Thailand to negotiate directly with the French and were not supporting an appeal to the Security Council. Thailand could hardly consider seeking the support of the Soviet Union with whom it still had no diplomatic relations. All in all, Thailand could not hope to gain the support of a majority in the Security Council.<sup>43</sup> Faced with these stark conclusions, Thailand’s strategy to avoid direct negotiations with France and bring the territorial issue before the United Nations ended in failure.

In August 1946 Thamrong Nawasawat replaced Pridi as Prime Minister. On 13 October Thamrong opened a Cabinet meeting which he had asked Pridi, who now held the official status of Elder Statesman, to attend. With the British and Americans supporting the French proposal, the Cabinet decided to follow a policy approach that was in basic agreement with it.<sup>44</sup> During his negotiations in France, Khuang had gained a sense that after Thailand had given back the territories, there was the possibility that the Battambang area would be returned once again to Thailand. It was possible that the US would assist in this second return. Putting its trust in this small ray of hope,<sup>45</sup> the Cabinet decided that on the territorial issue, Thailand would follow the course set by the US.

The Cabinet’s policy decision was discussed in the National Assembly on 14 and 15 October. During those two days of debate indignation and outrage poured out: the postwar French government insisted that the 1941 Treaty of Tokyo was invalid because Paris refused to legitimize the Vichy government

<sup>43</sup> Foreign Minister Direk Chainam’s explanation to the National Assembly on 14 October 1946. *Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 191–97.

<sup>44</sup> Konthi, *Kanwithesobai khong Thai*, p. 306.

<sup>45</sup> Prime Minister Thamrong Nawasawat’s statements to the National Assembly on 12 August 1947 (*Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 474–76, 482–483). In response to a question from an MP, Thamrong said, “in fact, I thought that we could get back at least two or three of the four provinces.”

that even the United States had recognized in 1941; even though France was the first country to be defeated in the war, it had secured a permanent seat on the UN Security Council after the war and was using that position to block Thailand's efforts to join the UN by linking it with their demands for territorial adjustments; the one million people living in the four provinces would return to being slaves of the French. Such was the anger and resentment of the Assembly members. Prime Minister Thamrong told the assembly that in keeping with the pacifistic spirit of the United Nations, Thailand was seeking a peaceful solution and would not get into a war with France. He expressed confidence that with US support Thailand would be able to reacquire a portion of the territories.

Direk Chainam, the Foreign Minister, stated that the thinking of all the postwar cabinets of the Free Thai government was to honor the return of the territories to France; nothing more was being demanded of Thailand than to return those territories. Direk went on to say that after returning the territories to France, it was also possible that with US help Thailand would be able to get back again even more territory than what it had just returned to France. He then made clear his fear that since Britain and the US did not recognize the territories as belonging to Thailand, if Bangkok continued to refuse to return them, it was possible that French forces would invade the four provinces. Former Prime Minister Seni Pramot of the opposition Democratic Party concurred, saying that as a small country, Thailand had no choice but to rely on Britain and the US, the two great powers. He believed that if Thailand did not act contrary to the US and entrusted the handling of the situation to the Americans, things would end well for Thailand. If Thailand opposed Britain and the US, it would suffer great adverse effects; so he agreed with the government's policy decision to follow the course set by Britain and the United States.<sup>46</sup> However, another member of the opposition, So Sethaputra, proposed that another idea would be to appeal to the UN for the self-determination of the people living in the four provinces, or else Thailand could unilaterally declare the independence of the Lao and Khmer people in the four provinces. Direk opposed this, saying that if Thailand declared it was going to give them independence, it would become isolated internationally.<sup>47</sup> It is evident from the foregoing discussion that the Thai leadership at this time had shifted toward relying on the US in the hope of reacquiring some portion of the territories, and that the new policy approach was also against overtly expressing support for Lao and Khmer independence. On 15 October 1946, by a vote of 91 to 29, the National Assembly approved the government's policy proposal.

On 17 November the Franco-Siamese Agreement of Settlement was signed in Washington. This agreement contained the Thai demand that an international Commission of Conciliation reexamine and determine on ethnic, geographical and economic grounds whether to revise or leave unchanged the national borders not only for the territory that Thailand had ceded to France in the treaty of 1907

---

<sup>46</sup> *Raingan* 2489-90, pp. 255-85. When Foreign Minister Direk gave a speech laying out the policy of the newly installed Thamrong cabinet to a joint sitting of both houses of the National Assembly on 26 August 1946, he told the assembly that "there has never been another time when the amicable relations between Britain, the US and Thailand have been better than during these past three months." (p. 146).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-11.

(the western region of Cambodia retroceded to Bangkok by the 1941 Treaty of Tokyo, which became the two Thai provinces of Battambang and Phibunsongkhram), but also the borders related to the 1893 treaty (when Thailand ceded the whole of Laos on the left bank of the Mekong River) and the 1904 treaty (when territories on the right bank of the Mekong were ceded to French-controlled Laos and which Thailand also reclaimed in the Treaty of Tokyo, organizing them into the provinces of Lan Chang and Sayaburi). However in essence, the agreement was the same as the original French proposal.

On 19 November a mass gathering took place sponsored by the Bangkok Samlaw (Trishaw) Union to protest the seizure of Thai territory by the French colonialists. Wat Sunthonjamon, representing the Thai Communist Party, protested the return of the territories to France.<sup>48</sup> On the 25th the joint committee arrived for the transfer of the territories, and in an amicable atmosphere under the monitoring of British and American observers, the handover was completed on 5 December. Five days earlier, in the afternoon of 1 December, Việt Minh pamphlets containing threats against the French were scattered around the Battambang marketplace, but there was no major disturbance.<sup>49</sup> By 8 December all four provinces had been formally returned to the French.

### 3. The International Commission of Conciliation and the Southeast Asian League

The five-member International Commission of Conciliation, with three neutral members from the US, Britain and Peru; plus one each from France and Thailand (whose member was Prince Wan Waithayakon, Thai Ambassador to the US), began working on 5 May 1947 in Washington. The Thai government appointed Prince Sakon, Prince Wan's older brother, as its agent before the commission; Prince Sakon's deputy was the influential political leader, Tiang Sirikhan. On 12 May Prince Sakon submitted Thailand's request to the Commission; the French presented their remarks on the 22nd; the Thai responded to the French remarks with a written rebuttal submitted on 29 May. Soon after the Commission of Conciliation had begun working, Prime Minister Thamrong dispatched Pridi Washington at the request of Prince Sakon and Tiang Sirikhan to help with the negotiations. Pridi remained in Washington from 10 May until 2 June, thus he must have had an important hand in drawing up Thailand's initial 12 May request and its 29 May rebuttal.

According to the commentary of the Thai Publicity Department, Thailand's written rebuttal stated that:

France talks about the possibility of Laos and Cambodia making a reverse demand on Thailand for territories, but the Thai government is not against conducting negotiations with a free and independent Laos and Cambodia. The Thai government would welcome the addition of Laos and Cambodia to the family of nations... If changes come about in accordance with the requests that

<sup>48</sup> Damri Ruangsutham, *Panyachon Pathiwat khong Chonchan Kammakon Thai: Roi Tamruat Ek Wat Sunthonjamon* (Pol. Lieutenant Wat Sunthonjamon: Revolutionary intellectual of the Thai working class) (Bangkok, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.35/47.

Thailand is making, then the people of the territories at issue who presently are demanding the realization of their hopes [meaning the Khmer and Laos who are involved in independence movements] will come to enjoy all aspects of political, social and economic freedom and lead a free and democratic way of life. With this way of life, all the people will be able to exercise the same rights regardless of creed, social standing, language or religion, and receive equal protection. They will also participate in governing their own countries... Despite being an extremely close community, the peoples on both sides of the Mekong River have been separated by that river since 1893 in contradiction to what is reasonable ethnically, geographically and economically, as well as being contrary to what is humane. But the peoples on both sides of the Mekong will come together once again, and peace, prosperity and happiness will likewise return once again... If the members of the Commission of Conciliation would like to visit the territories themselves to confirm these things with their own eyes, the Thai agent is ready to welcome them. France says that if Laos and Thailand were to unite, Laos would be in danger of extinction, but this is contrary to reality as well as against the opinions rightfully expressed by the people of the territories at issue. The Thai government agent is confident that if the people of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were given the opportunity to express their opinions in a referendum, they would make clear their true thoughts and inclinations... Thailand has no intention of bringing the people in the territories at issue under its rule. It only wishes for them to enjoy freedom and the other rights of democracy. Thailand has no ambition to expand its territory... Thailand's request arises from its genuine desire to bring stability to this part of the world, from its noble intention to support the inhabitants of the territories at issue in realizing the principles of liberty and democracy which they have never experienced before. Therefore Thailand asks the Commission of Conciliation to accept its request. Social harmony comes forth only with the advance toward democracy. Good government is impossible within the framework of colonialism. Thailand and its government value this fact and adhere to the principle of liberty and national self-determination as a human right."<sup>50</sup>

In its written rebuttal the Thai government stressed the value and importance of liberty, democracy and national self-determination and clearly supported the complete independence of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam from French control. The rebuttal also made clear the government's hope that after Laos gained its independence, it would of its own volition become a member of the "Thai democratic community," or else would form a confederation with Thailand. Heretofore the Thai government had refrained from expressing full-fledged support for Indochina's independence not only because it sought the re-retrocession of its territories but also out of diplomatic considerations. However, the emphasis that the 29 May Thai rebuttal put on Indochina's independence represented a departure from this policy.

---

<sup>50</sup> Publicity Department, *Khamplae Raigan*, pp. 63–78 (emphasis added).



On 27 June 1947 the Commission of Conciliation decided on recommendations that would maintain the existing status quo and not change any borders or territories. In reaching this decision the Commission had excluded any political or historic considerations, had given no regard at all to Thailand's arguments against colonialism and for protecting liberty and democracy, and had dismissed Thailand's claims saying that the ethnic, geographic and economic arguments that the Thai had presented lacked sufficient persuasiveness. Explaining to the National Assembly on 12 August the reason for an outcome that completely betrayed Thai hopes for a return of territory, the Thamrong cabinet stated:

We believe it was because from the start of our resort to conciliation, political considerations were at work which we had not expected. The great powers sympathized with our small country of Thailand only to the extent that it did not conflict with their national interests. It is true that at the time of the signing of the Franco-Siamese Agreement of Settlement, the great powers sympathized with Thailand. However, a conflict arose between their sympathy toward Thailand and other greater policy considerations, and the great powers chose to give their support to France...If France were ready to give Laos and Cambodia their independence, what sort of confederation (*sahaphan*) they joined would be a matter for an independent Laos and Cambodia to decide for themselves...Were France to propose granting them independence, then our delegate to the Commission of Conciliation had been instructed to support it.<sup>51</sup>

This explanation drew criticism from Khuang Aphaiwong, leader of the opposition Democratic Party. He had been the deputy leader of the Thai delegation to the negotiations of the Franco-Siamese agreement in the summer of 1946 and had gone to Paris that September, where he had gained the sense that France would retrocede a portion of the territories back to Thailand. But he was critical of the government because the Thai delegate on the Commission had paid scant attention to getting back the four provinces, and instead had engaged in grand talk, bringing up issues of independence for neighboring countries and a league of Southeast Asian nations. Such talk hardened France's attitude with the result that Bangkok was unable to obtain what it should have obtained.<sup>52</sup> Khuang had been Prime Minister during the final months of World War II, and his flexible, compromising approach to diplomacy had ameliorated Thai relations with Japan and had succeeded in avoiding a Japanese *coup*

<sup>51</sup> *Raingan* 2489–90, p. 509.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460. Khuang repeatedly criticized the government for its approach to the negotiations. On 5 November 1947 in the House of Representatives he said, "You should only write the things that Thailand is demanding. The government's policy should not be concerned with their [Indochina's] struggle. The struggle in Vietnam and those places is a problem for the UN and not something that we should be involved in. It would be better for Thailand to keep in mind its status as a small country." (*Raingan* 2490, p. 3183). "Wouldn't it have been better to talk with France about the lost territories first, and after that about independence and the far east union [i.e., the Southeast Asian League] Thailand lost because it didn't argue for the return of the territories which should have been its immediate concern and instead took up the issue of other countries' independence which should not have been its immediate concern." (pp. 3187–89).

*de force* which had been French Indochina's fate. From his experience he looked upon Pridi's approach to diplomacy as ignoring the limited status of Thailand as a small country and the pursuit of ideals in an excessively dogmatic and heedless manner that made France uneasy about its position in the negotiations.

Responding to Khuang's criticism, Tiang Sirikhan, the Thai government's deputy delegate to the Commission of Conciliation, explained that

Although Thailand had not made any reference to Laos or Cambodia in its request, France in its remarks of 22 May stated that it was fighting for the independence of Laos and Cambodia. It had not been Thailand's intention to speak about the matter of Laos and Cambodia as it was a political issue and outside of the Commission of Conciliation's scope of consideration. But the French brought it up, so the Thai side said that if France gave them independence, Thailand would not ask for territory; and we also proposed holding a referendum of the local inhabitants.<sup>53</sup>

The issue of Indochina's independence that the Thai delegate brought up was largely as Tiang Sirikhan explained, but Pridi and the Thamrong Cabinet had already made the assumption that the Commission would not approve of the retrocession of territory back to Thailand, and one way to cope with this outcome, one which domestic Thai public opinion would also support, was to bring the independence of Indochina including the four provinces once again before the United Nations and seek the judgment of that organization based on the principle of self-determination. As noted earlier, Thailand's leadership after the war was troubled by the incompatibility of their twin demands of calling for Indochina's independence while at the same time seeking to hold onto territory taken back from Cambodia and Laos. However, if there were no possibility of getting the lost territories back again, their dilemma would be resolved. They would be unencumbered in pursuing a policy of independence for the countries of Indochina. But since these countries together with Thailand were small weak nations, Pridi and the Thai leadership around him felt that it was essential for them all to join together in forming a league, or perhaps an association (*sahaphan* was Pridi's Thai term), to preserve the peace and promote the economic development of the region. In other words, Pridi and his government supporters saw the independence of the Indochinese states and their inclusion along with Thailand in a regional association as being two parts of a single inseparable undertaking.

Pridi talked about his *sahaphan* concept, which he dubbed the "Southeast Asian League,"<sup>54</sup> in his 2

<sup>53</sup> *Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 520–21.

<sup>54</sup> This is its most frequent rendering in English; in his 2 July 1947 report, Pridi's Thai phrasing was *Sahaphan rawang Prathet nai Phak Echia Buraphatai* (Association among Countries in the Southeast Asian Region). In his 1972 reminiscences which he wrote in French (see reference in note 56), Pridi called it *l'Association des Nations Unies de l'Asie du Sud-est*. The *Bangkok Post*, which carried an English translation of his reminiscences, rendered this as the "Southeast Asian United Nations' Association" (28 Nov. 1974). Even in 1947 after the inception of the organization, its appellation in Thai as well as English remained uncertain. Khuang made the comment in the National Assembly on 12 August 1947 that "the French are against the *sahaphap* [union]" (*Raingan* 2489–90, p. 518). On 6 November of the same year at a press conference, Prime Minister Thamrong called

July 1947 report to the Prime Minister after returning from Washington. In the report Pridi explained:

- 1) Many of the leaders and political people of the countries in the region have the following opinion. The countries in the region are presently separated and dispersed, but if they were to form a league, with the region's abundance of natural resources, the economies of each of the countries would improve. This would bring about peace and happiness for the people of the region, and in turn would contribute to the world's economy and to world peace and stability.
- 2) Numerous European and American comrades of mine in the anti-Japanese movement have advocated the idea of a league; and Thailand's anti-Japanese organization is not just made up of Thai, it also has sections made up of other Asian peoples.
- 3) After the war ended numerous European and American journalists and [Indochinese?] political leaders visited me while passing through Thailand carrying letters entrusted to them and addressed to me from numerous leaders and political people. In these letters the writers expressed their hopes for the foundation of a league. All of the letters said that because Thailand is centrally located among the different countries and had preserved its independence, Bangkok should be the capital [*Nakhon luang*] of the league when it is formed.
- 4) The idea of setting up a league is also widespread in foreign countries, and in numerous localities associations [*samakhom*] supported by the local people have started to be organized.<sup>55</sup>

In his 1972 reminiscences Pridi wrote:

Among the old Southeast Asian friends who have visited me since my arrival in Paris in 1970, some of them have expressed their nostalgia for our Southeast Asian League which we created after the Japanese surrender and dissolved in 1947 at the time of the reactionary *coup d'état* in Siam. The reactionaries contradicted themselves in their accusations against this organization for some thought it was a Southeast Asian communist league, while others confused it with the Pan-Thai Union planned by Marshal Phibun in order to unify the people of the Thai race in China, India and Southeast Asia with a view to creating a great Thai Empire under the dictatorship of Marshal Phibun himself...It must be remembered that before the Second World War only Siam, among the Southeast Asian countries, was nominally independent...A certain number of patriots from these colonized countries of various political and ideological persuasions had clandestinely taken refuge in Siam...I am sympathetic towards all patriotic refugees with whom I have become acquainted and make no ideological distinction, for each is free to choose his own way. During the Second World War the Japanese occupied the whole of Southeast Asia. In order to get the support of the native populations of the colonized countries, Japan helped the local patriots to form so-called in-

---

it "*Sahaphap Echia Tawanok Chiengtai*" [Southeast Asian union] (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.92.1/10).

<sup>55</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/47.

dependent governments...As for the other patriots from the Southeast Asian countries who were in Siam, a good number of them joined our [Seri Thai] resistance movement against the Japanese. They were instructed in the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare by our movement, and were also trained by American and British military officers whose primary objective was to defeat Japan. However after the Japanese surrender, the former Western colonists returned to take back their former colonies. They encountered resistance from the local patriots. A certain number of these patriots came to Siam to seek our help. During the conversations I had with these patriots, we came to the conclusion that all the countries in Southeast Asia would, through their own efforts, become independent in the near future. But each one of us would have to confront two giants: Nationalist China which had emerged after the victory over Japan, and India now independent of the British Empire. If after achieving independence all these countries lived separately in isolation, it would be difficult for them to defend themselves against any threats from these two giants. Consequently it would be necessary to establish an association of the countries in Southeast Asia for mutual defense. This organization was not to be a federation or a confederation of member states, for each nation was fully independent both in its domestic and foreign affairs. It was simply an “*entente cordiale*” between member states. In order that the association might be accepted by all the peoples of the region, it was necessary for it to start off as a popular organization. As Siam is situated in the center of the region it was natural that the association’s headquarters should be set up there. I therefore agreed that Bangkok, our capital, should be the headquarters of the initial core of the organization by putting at its disposal a building and some necessary funds. Many patriots from the Southeast Asian countries joined the association...The association was not a communist league, for its members were made up of patriots of all persuasions and included Prince Phetsarath, former Viceroy of Laos.”<sup>56</sup>

A shift of international perception can be seen between Pridi’s July 1947 report and his 1972 remi-

---

<sup>56</sup> “The Pridi Banomyong Story,” *Bangkok Post*, 28 Nov. 1974 or Pridi Banomyong, *Ma vie mouvementée et mes 21 ans d’exil en Chine Populaire* (Paris: UNESCO, 1972), pp. 71–5. In the quote Pridi wrote that there were people who got confused between himself and Phibun, but this would indicate that the thinking of the two men and their supporters concerning the Indochinese territories and Indochina liberation was largely alike. Both sides were part of the same political current, had a shared history and continuity; and there were only small differences in their political views. Wong Phonninon wrote that Pridi lent his support to a conference of political leaders from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia that was held in Bangkok around 23 July 1947; Wong Phonninon, *Nayobai Tangprathet thi Phung Prathana lae Naewkhawamkhit khong Than Pridi Phanomyong* [A desirable diplomatic policy and Pridi Phanomyong’s thought] (Bangkok: Khana Kammakan Damnoen Ngan Chalong 100 pi Chattakan Nai Pridi Phanomyong Ratthaburut Awuso, 1999), p. 24. This conference issued a Bangkok declaration saying that they would stand united in their fight against the return of the colonial powers. *Mahachon*, the official organ of the Thai Communist Party, reported that the Southeast Asian League (*Sannibat Echia Akkhane*) was established on 8 September 1947 in Bangkok by representatives from five countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos). The purpose of the League was to promote friendship and understanding among nations in Southeast Asia, to co-operate with each other in the fight for independence, and to promote peace and the welfare of the people (*Mahachon*, No. 105, 14 Sept. 1947, p. 6); see also Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885–1954* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), pp. 256–65.

niscence, but it can be seen that the idea of a Southeast Asian League originated from Pridi's own idea of a region-wide economic sphere (which he had first set forth in his economic plan proposed in 1933 following the constitutional revolution) and from his experience in organizing a anti-Japanese movement during the war whose membership was composed of people from the nations of Indochina. The league received the support of Indochinese leaders that included the Việt Minh, whose delegation to Southeast Asia had its office in Bangkok; the Lao Issara government in exile, which had fled to Bangkok from Vientiane in April 1946<sup>57</sup>; and the leaders of the Khmer Issarak.<sup>58</sup>

On 25 April 1947, prior to the start of the Commission of Conciliation, the French showed Prince Wan their idea for an Indochina confederation that they called the Pan Union,<sup>59</sup> which they hoped would get the Thai to withdraw their territorial demands. Prince Wan immediately informed Bangkok of the French proposal,<sup>60</sup> and Pridi, who was preparing to visit the US, was also informed of it. This move by the French meant that there were now two ideas in the works for an association of Indochinese states. There are no details of the discussions between Prime Minister Thamrong and Pridi before his departure for the US, but both men knew that getting a re-retrocession of territory was going to be a difficult task. However, they held out the hope of getting US support, and presumably they were hopeful that the French proposal of a union would contain benefits for Thailand. While in Washington assisting with the conciliation talks and then in Paris, Pridi searched for ways to adjust his concept of a league to the French plan for a union. The amount of effort he put into this endeavor can be inferred from the title that he put on his final report to the Prime Minister: "The Southeast Asian League."

When Pridi arrived in Washington, the French had their Foreign Ministry official, G. Georges Picot, get in contact with him. The Pan Union was initially presented to Pridi as Picot's private proposal. To get the Thai to drop their demand for the reacquisition of territory, the proposed Pan Union would resemble the Pan American Union. Its purpose would be to enhance interaction in areas such as economic affairs, culture and transportation; it would undertake joint planning in order to have access to foreign loans which would be used for the union's development; and its members would include only Thailand and France, which would represent Laos and Cambodia who belonged to the French Union. The proposal totally excluded Vietnam. By comparison, Pridi's *sahaphan* concept for the region was

<sup>57</sup> In December 1946 Prince Phetsarath took over from Khammao as Prime Minister of the government in exile.

<sup>58</sup> 3349, *Chao Phetcharat*, pp. 144–47. This work is a biography of Phetsarath compiled from the prince's autobiographical materials and from information of the book's author who went by the penname "3349." The book states that before the *coup d'état* in November 1947, the Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian liberation organizations in Bangkok decided to co-operate in purchasing arms and to join hands against the French. Phetsarath said that he carried on negotiations for independence with the French through the American Embassy in Bangkok. This author has found no other documentation to date about these activities of Phetsarath and what connection they might have had with the Thai government's territorial negotiations.

<sup>59</sup> "Pan Union" was the expression that Prince Wan used in his report to the Thai government and which Pridi also used in his 2 July 1947 report to the Prime Minister following his return from the US.

<sup>60</sup> Publicity Department announcement of 5 July 1947 (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/47). In the House of Representatives on 5 November 1947, Prime Minister Thamrong explained that "Pan Southeast Asia [the Pan Union] was unconnected with the Commission of Conciliation, and negotiations on it took place between Picot and Pridi. Both men conferred with each other outside of the framework of the Commission of Conciliation. Picot first made his proposal, then he and Pridi exchanged views" (*Raingan 2490*, p. 3192).

his Southeast Asian League whose members were the four independent nations of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.<sup>61</sup> The two plans were far apart fundamentally, and trying to compromise and adjust them ultimately proved impossible.

On 2 July 1947, as already noted, Pridi submitted his report on the conciliation, and on the 5th the Publicity Department published the Thamrong government's announcement entitled "Franco-Siamese Territorial Conciliation and the Southeast Asian League." The announcement did not publicize the contents of the 27 June recommendations by the Franco-Siamese Commission of Conciliation which had totally rejected Thailand's case. The Government was afraid of being criticized by the opposition party for conflating Thailand's demand for the return of territory with the government's idea of a Southeast Asian league. To prevent the territorial mediation outcome from becoming a weapon in domestic political battles, the government argued that it had made every effort in the conciliation to get back the four provinces and that sounding out the French about the Southeast Asian League had been carried out separately from the conciliation. In its announcement the government made public the whole of Pridi's 2 July report but excluded the 10th paragraph. In that unpublished paragraph Pridi had written passionately about the need for the Southeast Asian League:

It is important for us Thai to be cognizant of the international tide. The hope of a great many people in Southeast Asia is for the establishment of a *Sahapan* (Southeast Asian league) or some similar organization. Should such an organization be set up, we would have to begin thinking whether to participate in that organization with Bangkok as the capital or as its metropolis, or if preferring not to participate in it, to be isolated from such an organization set up by the Southeast Asian countries around us. It is this official's hope that most Thai would not take a narrow domestic view in judging the situation. There are those who are opposed, but ultimately the final decision will depend on how the majority of Thai judge the situation. But whatever the final outcome, our Southeast Asian brethren should understand that there are many people in Thailand who empathize with the high ideals of our Southeast Asian brothers and sisters.<sup>62</sup>

On 12 August 1947 the government disclosed the recommendations of the Commission of Conciliation to the National Assembly and sought the judgment of the assembled MPs as whether to accept or reject them. As mentioned previously, the government was strongly criticized by Khuang of the Democratic Party, and by other members of the Assembly. Phra Phisetphanit, (Poc Khun),<sup>63</sup> a Khmer Issarak partisan, who had been elected to the Thai House of Representatives in the August 1946 supplementary elections from the Battambang 2nd district, also expressed his displeasure:

---

<sup>61</sup> Pridi's report to the Prime Minister, 2 July 1947 (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/47).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> From the author's check of the records at the Thai National Assembly, as an MP, Phra Phisetphanit used the Thai name Wibun Pokmontri; his wife's name was Chaoon Aphaiwong.

Today is a momentous day that decides the lives of many people who have looked to the Thai nation to help them get their freedom....The Thai people lost their territories by force. From the time of my childhood I long dreamed that the Thai people would rise up and reclaim their lost territories. I have given my total support to the Thai people. I have never feared any of the dangers I have faced. I sacrificed my all and achieved the wonderful outcome I had worked for [the recovery of Battambang in 1941]. It was a splendid victory for the nation. Then by force the government was compelled to hand back that which I equated with my own life...The government never consulted the people of the four provinces or their representatives beforehand. The French had Lao and Khmer people sitting with them at the negotiations in Washington.<sup>64</sup>

At a closed-door session of the Assembly on the afternoon of 12 August 1947, Prime Minister Thamrong presented the government's plan for responding to the recommendations of the Commission of Conciliation, and sought the opinions of the National Assembly. The plan had adopted the proposal of Phra Phisetphanit and other assembly members which called for appealing to the General Assembly in accordance with Article 35 of the UN Charter. Thamrong gave the following reasons for making this appeal to the UN:

- 1) The Commission of Conciliation claimed that making a judgment on the transfer of an established political unit (the Kingdom of Laos) was beyond its competence. But what France called the "Kingdom of Laos" was not established until the Franco–Lao *modus vivendi* of 27 August 1946. Therefore in the interpretation of the Thai government, the Commission did have the authority to make a judgment, because at the time the Kingdom of Laos had not yet come into existence. Thus the Commission's recommendation was flawed because it had failed to make a judgment on this issue. Moreover, this failure to make a judgment threatened to cause unrest in Laos and Cambodia.
- 2) The Commission of Conciliation rejected Thailand's ethnic, geographic and economic arguments which it presented with maps but never clarified the reasons for its rejection.
- 3) The forceful change of sovereignty without ascertaining the opinion of the people living in the contested territories could be harmful to peace, which brought the issue within the scope of Article 35 of the UN Charter.
- 4) Despite Thailand's requests, the Commission of Conciliation never surveyed the opinions of the local inhabitants.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Raingan* 2489–90, pp. 500–502. Phra Phisetphanit continued to play a central role in the debate over the disputed territories. With the 17 November 1946 Franco–Siamese Agreement of Settlement, Battambang and the other three provinces were retroceded to France, but he and the other members of the National Assembly who had been elected from those provinces did not lose their credentials and continued to hold their seats.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 515–17.



As for the decision to how to respond to the recommendations of the Commission of Conciliation, the majority of MPs voiced the view that it was the responsibility not of the National Assembly but of the government itself to decide. Finally by a vote of 43 to 19 the Assembly decided not to express its intentions on the recommendations. The next day, 13 August, the Publicity Department for the first time made public the Commission's recommendations, and told the people that the government was in the process of examining whether to approve or reject them. Four days before the 1 November 1947 deadline for responding to the recommendations, the Thai government presented its response to the Commission's Chairman:

Our government, which adheres to the objectives and principles of the United Nations, especially to the principles of justice, of government based on self-determination, and of liberty for the people, finds it difficult to accept the Commission's recommendations of 27 June 1947...The sympathy that Thailand has toward the independence of the states of Laos and Cambodia was declared in the Commission of Conciliation. Our government hereby confirms that it adheres to the principle of government based on self-determination. This is the only way to bring peace to Southeast Asia...Furthermore, our government reserves the right of appeal to United Nations as provided in the Charter of the United Nations concerning the peaceful settlement of disputes.<sup>66</sup>

When the government informed the House of Representatives on 5 November that it had rejected the recommendations of the Commission of Conciliation, Phra Phisetphanit said that the government's decision coincided with his own group's demand and he totally supported it. He welcomed the government's statement that the UN's principle of self-determination should be applied to Cambodia and Laos and that they should be given independence.<sup>67</sup> Speaking to reporters at a press conference about the government's rejection, Prime Minister Thamrong said,

We rejected it in the national interest. If problems arise in our diplomatic policy because of the rejection, I am prepared to resign and make way for a new government. The loss of our territories was decided at the time of the conclusion of the formal agreement with Britain [on 1 January 1946] that forcefully abolished the Treaty of Tokyo...But even with this, we have made every effort to uphold the rights and interests of Thailand...If Laos and Cambodia can become independent, we will be satisfied. We will examine what to do next now that we have rejected the recommendations.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Announcement of the Prime Minister's Office dated 5 November 1947; Publicity Department publication dated 7 November 1947 (NAT, So.Ro.0201.35/47 and (2) So.Ro.0201.92.1/10; *Raingan* 2490, pp. 3180–81).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3186.

<sup>68</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.92.1/10.

#### 4. Developments after the 8 November *Coup d'état* and during the Cold War

In the early hours of 8 November 1947 a faction in the military headed by Phibunsongkhram overthrew the Thamrong government in a coup. On the 10th they invited Khuang Aphaiwong, the leader of the opposition Democratic Party and a critic of the Thamrong government's approach to the territorial negotiations, to be the Prime Minister. Soon after the coup, the military confiscated the weapons of the Việt Minh in Bangkok and Udon. On 15 November they raided the Bangkok home of Trần Văn Giàu and took away weapons. On 3 December they did the same at the home of Thongin Phuriphat, the previous Minister of Industry, and again on 5 December at the home of Thong Kanthatham, the former Deputy Interior Minister.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile in Udon on 25 November soldiers and police searched the homes of Việt Minh leaders. On 4 December leaflets were scattered around Udon city which read, "Phibun is leaning towards the British and Americans. Phibun has broken his promises. We demand our weapons [be returned]."<sup>70</sup>

In a document titled "Measures for Dealing with the Evacuees" and dated 20 December 1947 sent to the Governor of Udon, the new Interior Minister, Lt. Gen. Sinatyotharak, ordered that the Governor "explain to them [the *Yuan opphayop*, Vietnamese evacuees] the necessity and the government's intent for demanding a complete halt to all gatherings, training practices, propagandizing, communications, and the accumulation of weapons and war supplies," and "tell them to co-operate in maintaining order and to carry on as usual with their businesses and work." The document also informed the Governor that the new government's policy was "to limit assistance to the *Yuan opphayop* to humanitarian aid only"; that for easier control officials should have them live together in groups and identification booklets should be issued to them; that "people who behave as good citizens will be protected so they can build a foundation for permanent residence, while those who want to return to their home country should not be hindered from going...if there are children who wish to study in our public schools, they should be accepted."<sup>71</sup> A report from the Interior Minister to Prime Minister Khuang gave as the reason for prohibiting Việt Minh activities within Thailand and confiscating their weapons the fact that not doing so would cause confusion and misunderstanding in Thailand's diplomatic relations; moreover, there was the danger that Việt Minh weapons could be used by groups that opposed the coup to attack and topple the government.<sup>72</sup> Pridi and his civilian Free Thai government supporters, whom the military coup had driven from power, remained in possession of the modern weapons they had re-

<sup>69</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/23.

<sup>70</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/21.

<sup>71</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.35/47. In the same vein was the case of the Việt Minh representative in India who applied for a visa to enter Thailand after receiving orders from his government to visit Bangkok. The Thai Chargé d'Affaires in Delhi asked the Foreign Ministry if it would agree to issue a visa since he did not think there would be any unfavorable effect on Thailand. The Foreign Ministry in turn queried the Cabinet since there was already a precedent from August 1947 whereby the Cabinet had allowed a representative of the Việt Minh to enter the country. In response, the post-coup Cabinet on 25 November 1947 decided that "the domestic situation is still not normal, so we want to suspend [permission] temporarily. The Foreign Ministry should reject it" (NAT, So.Ro.0201.9.3/32).

<sup>72</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/21.

ceived while co-operating with the British and Americans during the war; therefore the Thai military worried that these people could join with the Indochinese liberation forces in Thailand to carry out an armed uprising against the new government. As will be pointed out further below in connection with the November 1948 arrest of Northeastern Thai political leaders on charges of supporting the Lao Issara and plotting a separatist revolt, activity in support of Indochina's liberation came to be looked upon as anti-government activity.

However, the Indochina policy of the new military-dominated government was not a 180-degree turn away from that of the previous Pridi-dominated Free Thai governments. Although less supportive of the Indochinese liberation movements, and displaying an amicable attitude toward the French in Indochina<sup>73</sup> (which included the dispatch of a military mission to Saigon in September 1948), the new government allowed the Việt Minh delegation to Southeast Asia and the Lao Issara government-in-exile to continue functioning in Bangkok; and along with Thai officials and the people in general, it continued to sympathize with the Indochinese movements for independence and to look upon them as patriotic movements.

At the time of the military mission's visit to Saigon in September, led by the Deputy Army Commander, Lt. Gen. Kat Katsongkhram, Prime Minister Phibun set forth his policy:

Thailand must act well and show good will toward all groups. We have a high regard for what is human, and we must consider it in broad terms. To praise one side while dragging down the other is not the Thai way of thinking. However, acting unlawfully against national laws harms the welfare and happiness of human beings, and this cannot be tolerated. The achievement of independence and liberty is the desire of human beings worldwide. But groups fearlessly pursuing their nationalist aspirations, should they operate on Thai territory and break Thai laws, harm the nation's tranquility in many ways and call into question Thailand's responsibility for maintaining international friendship, something of which we have to be especially mindful.<sup>74</sup>

The Prime Minister was taking an equidistant stance *vis-à-vis* both sides fighting in Indochina, and he was not going to allow Thai territory to be used in the war.

The French propagandized the Thai telling them that the Indochinese liberation movements were communist movements. During 1949 the Associated States of Indochina were set up within the French Union which gave partial independence to the Bảo Đại regime in Vietnam (agreement signed 8 March), the government of Laos (19 July) and the government of Cambodia (8 November). These

---

<sup>73</sup> French comment on the first round of negotiations between themselves and the Kat Katsongkhram military mission on 17 September 1948 (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/6, p. 90); Katsongkhram report of inspection published 26 October 1948; Kat Katsongkhram, *Banthuk Khosangket lai prakan nai Khrau pai Rachakan Indochin-Farangset mua wanthi 14 Kanyayon Pho. So. 2491* [Some Impressions from an Official Visit to French-Indochina from 14 September 1948] (Bangkok, 1948), p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Lt. Gen. Kat Katsongkhram report on mission of inspection to Indochina dated 25 September 1948 (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/6), p. 99.

states were recognized by Britain and the US, and following the lead of these two powers, Thailand recognized them on 28 February 1950. But for more than a year after that, until 20 July 1951, the Việt Minh's delegation continued to reside in Bangkok.<sup>75</sup> This is a good indication that the Phibun government did not fully side with the French against the Indochinese liberation movements until the full impact of the Cold War had set in at the start of the 1950s.

Along with allowing the Viet Nam Government Delegation to South East Asia (which represented Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Viet Nam) to continue functioning in Bangkok, there is also documentation suggesting that following the coup and Phibun's later return to power, a certain degree of friendly relations continued between the Thai and Việt Minh governments. One document is the letter of 20 January 1948 in the name of Col. Nguyễn Thanh Sơn, a member of the Viet Nam Government Delegation to South East Asia, and addressed to Phibun, then Commander-in-Chief of the army (before subsequently replacing Khuang as Prime Minister), which along with asking for the return of Việt Minh weapons confiscated by the Thai military, also appealed to Phibun's long-time sympathy for Vietnam's independence struggle.<sup>76</sup> Another document was a letter sent to Phibun following his return to power on 8 April 1948. Dated 22 April, the letter was from Lê Hi, acting President of the Vietnam Government Delegation to South East Asia, and it congratulated Phibun on his assumption of the Prime Ministership. Phibun was absent from Bangkok at the time; therefore on receiving the letter, the Cabinet Secretary delivered it to the acting Prime Minister, then immediately drafted a reply. On 27 April when handed the draft reply for his signature, Phibun decided to hold it back. "I've given it thought, but we still can't have formal contacts with them. Hold off on replying for the present. It's better to wait for the next opportunity."<sup>77</sup> While not willing to deal formally with the Việt Minh, Phibun also did not express any hostile attitude toward the movement and its representatives in Bangkok.

Another piece of evidence indicating that Thai officials continued to be sympathetic toward the anti-French forces in Indochina is contained in a 29 July 1948 document from the Thai Vice-Consul in Saigon to the Foreign Minister. This stated that Saigon newspapers had received information from the French authorities reporting on the anti-Vietnamese feelings harbored by the Thai. The Vice-Consul, Wikrom Ninnat, who was then in charge of the Thai Consulate-General in Saigon, regarded this information as a deliberate French effort to incite a split between Vietnam and Thailand. In the document Wikrom commented that, "Knowing that the Vietnamese hope for Thai assistance, the French are afraid of co-operation between Vietnam and Thailand, and they are taking every opportunity to try to create bad feelings between the two peoples."<sup>78</sup>

To improve Franco-Thai relations, a former French military attaché who had been stationed in Thailand visited Bangkok, and at his reception party he proposed to Phibun the invitation of a Thai mili-

---

<sup>75</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11.

<sup>76</sup> See Murashima, "Opposing French Colonialism," p. 376 note 78.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.92/36.

tary mission to visit Indochina. Phibun accepted this proposal, and on 21 August 1948 the French Legation in Bangkok issued a formal invitation for the visit.<sup>79</sup> The military mission, made up of seven members led by Lt. Gen. Kat, visited Saigon from 14 to 21 September 1948. The French gave the mission a hospitable welcome as they sought to gain the co-operation of the Thai military to halt the use of Thailand as a sanctuary for Indochina's liberation movements and to put a stop to the smuggling of weapons into Indochina.<sup>80</sup>

During the mission's visit, the French proposed a military agreement,<sup>81</sup> but Kat rejected this. However, on 21 September, the day of the mission's departure from Saigon, at the request of Major Gen. Alessandri (Commander of France's Ground Forces in the Far East), Kat signed a "Memorandum for Negotiations" which laid out in writing procedures for conducting future negotiations. The memorandum enumerated matters that in principle both sides agreed should be examined in order to reach a military agreement between Thailand and France in the future. These matters included the expeditious exchange of information on the smuggling of weapons and provisions reported by the border guards and military liaison officers on both sides, coordination in supervising the border to prevent insurgents from making cross-border escapes, the Thai authorities interdicting all smuggled supplies and intercepting their shipment, and the Thai Navy informing their French counterparts about the movement of ships smuggling supplies.<sup>82</sup>

In line with Phibun's policy of maintaining equidistance, the Kat Katsongkhram mission did not conclude any agreement with the French. However, the report Kat submitted after returning to Bangkok indicates that his views were not entirely the same as Phibun's. In his report Kat said:

The Việt Minh in Bangkok are co-operating with Hồ Chí Minh and carrying on anti-French activities. They [illegally] have communications equipment; they put out documents slandering the French government; they are gathering members; they are bringing in funds from Indochina; and they are using Thai territory to carry on such activities as part of their plans to seize power. They are getting funds and weapons from China as well as from overseas. The French are making efforts to control these activities, but the insurgents take refuge in Thai territory making it difficult to pursue them right to the end. Actually Thailand has been intending to co-operate with the French, but they have only given us name lists of people who are communists; they have not informed us

<sup>79</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/6, p. 37.

<sup>80</sup> 22 September 1948 report telegraphed by the Thai Legation in Paris about a French newspaper report on the visit of the Thai military mission to Saigon which commented that "the Thai government is expected to come up with ways to crack down on Vietnamese subversives in Thailand who have the aim of fighting against a foreign country [i.e., French Indochina]. This visit is the first step toward drawing up a military agreement to supervise the borders and control the trade of banned weapons in neutral countries" (*ibid.*, p. 75).

<sup>81</sup> Document No. 12517/2491, report from the Vice-Consul in Saigon to the Foreign Minister dated 2 October 1948 (*ibid.*, p. 77). The Vice-Consul expressed his opinion that the domestic situation inside Indochina had to be taken into consideration when deciding how much to co-operate with the French, and that at present it was uncertain when the war would end and who would win.

<sup>82</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/6, pp. 82–84.

of who has done what illegal activities and where they are living. We cannot punish people just because they are communists.”<sup>83</sup>

From these comments in Kat’s report, one senses that even after the coup, the Thai were not doing much to impede or punish the Việt Minh. He went on to express the opinion that the domestic groups around Pridi Phanomyong were pinkish communist elements that were co-operating with the communists in Indochina, and that there was considerable danger of them communizing Thailand. His advice was that the Thai government should suppress Pridi and his supporters along with the Indochinese communists. He then proposed that Thailand ask France for military assistance.<sup>84</sup>

While there was a strong feeling of sympathy among the Thai people for the liberation of Indochina, the French sought to change the attitude of the Thai leadership by presenting information showing that the liberation movements in Indochina were being led by communists. For example, on 8 December 1948 the French Embassy in Bangkok showed the Thai Foreign Minister four documents printed in mid-1948 by a “national salvation association” (*samaakhom kuchat*) that was an important Việt Minh-affiliated organization. The French pointed out that the contents of these documents were information guides about the Indochinese Communist Party.<sup>85</sup> Another example was a photograph that a secretary from the Embassy brought to the Foreign Ministry on 2 July 1949. It had come from a Pacific issue of *Time* Magazine and showed Tan Malaka of the Indonesian Communist Party together with Hồ Chí Minh. The French wanted to show the Thai just how close Hồ’s relations were with top leaders in the communist movement.<sup>86</sup>

In late 1948 the French Embassy sent over copies of the October 22 and 26 issues of the *Vietnam Information* newspaper published in Bangkok by the Việt Minh-run Vietnam News Service. Because of the communist content in the issues, the French wanted the Thai to clamp down on the newspaper. Phibun approved of this move and gave the police instructions to rein in the paper. However, the Director-General of the Police Department, Chatrakankoson, a close Phibun confidant, told the Prime Minister that

The publication law of 1941 allows a wide breadth of freedom in the publishing of newspapers which means that the *Vietnam Information* newspaper can be published like any other newspaper.

---

<sup>83</sup> Kat, *Banthuk Khosangket*, pp. 34–35.

<sup>84</sup> Kat told the French that even if the Thai attempted to suppress the communists, the Thai did not have sufficient weapons, and he asked the French for tanks, machine guns, hand grenades and communications equipment. The French said they would officially study the Thai request (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.25/6, pp. 87–88). Kat later wrote (*Banthuk Khosangket*, pp. 84–85) that the Thai army had only antiquated weapons, and the weapons confiscated from the Free Thai after the November 1947 coup were far more modern. He suggested sending Thai soldiers to the French army in Indochina for training on modern up-to-date weapons.

<sup>85</sup> Document No. 16090/2491, from Foreign Minister M.C. Pridithepphong Thewakun to the Prime Minister dated 17 December 1948 (NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/23).

<sup>86</sup> Document No. 10297/2492, from Deputy Foreign Minister Pote Sarasin to the Prime Minister dated 12 July 1949 (*ibid.*).

The police check the contents of news stories, but unless there is something illegal, they cannot prevent articles from being published. The French Ambassador says that we should close down the paper because it is communist, but this is not an appropriate reason. Not only is there no law against communism, there is also the worry that it could hurt friendly relations with the Soviet Union which has opened a legation in Bangkok. The newspaper has not yet published anything illegal, so we cannot tighten controls on it right now.

Phibun was not pleased with this reply, and he repeated his order to clamp down on the paper while asking if there were not some way to come up with deportation measures or other means for dealing with the affair.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the concerns of the French and the Thai Prime Minister, the Vietnam News Service continued operating in Bangkok. When Báo Đại signed the Franco-Vietnamese agreement on 8 March 1949 that set up an independent Vietnamese regime within the French Union, the news service printed a 34-page Thai-language publication titled *Bao Dai toklong kap Farangset yangrai*. Then on 2 September 1949, the fourth anniversary of Vietnam's declaration of independence, the news service published a 24-page Thai translation of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

With the establishment of Báo Đại's State of Vietnam within the French Union, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Hungary and North Korea all took this as the opportunity to recognize the DRV.<sup>88</sup> In January 1950 the Bangkok-based Delegation of the DRV (formerly the Vietnam Delegation to Southeast Asia) submitted to the Thai Foreign Ministry a copy of an announcement made by Hồ on 14 January. The announcement said:

Although Vietnam and France signed a provisional agreement on 14 September 1946, France has not stopped its war in Vietnam, and it has set up the Báo Đại government. The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam declares that it represents the general will of the Vietnamese people, and that it alone is the legitimate government. In order to build a world of peace and democracy, the government of Vietnam wants to open diplomatic relations with all governments that respect equality and Vietnam's sovereignty.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly the DRV was vying with Báo Đại's regime to gain Thai recognition as the legitimate government of Vietnam. In February the Thai Cabinet held three meetings to discuss whether or not to recognize the Báo Đại government of Vietnam along with Cambodia and Laos, which had been recognized by Britain (on 8 February) and the US (on 9 February). A number of the Cabinet Ministers argued against recognition, but the majority approved, and on 28 February the Bangkok government

---

<sup>87</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.92/36.

<sup>88</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/12, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11.



recognized the three independent states of Indochina within the French Union.<sup>90</sup>

On 17 October 1950 a meeting was held (chaired by Gen. Luang Hansongkhram) to discuss the defense of the kingdom. There it was reported that “about 5000 of the Vietnamese who have moved into and are living in Thailand support Hồ Chí Minh.”<sup>91</sup> Some of these people wrote letters to the Thai government criticizing its recognition of the Bảo Đại regime. One such letter, dated 5 July from two people in Sisaket province who wrote in Vietnamese, said that

It is regrettable that the Thai government has recognized the Bảo Đại government and allowed it to open a diplomatic mission in Bangkok... We [Vietnamese] strictly obey Thailand's laws; we resolutely support the independent government of Hồ Chí Minh; and we only accept the orders of Nguyễn Đức Quỳ, the representative [in Bangkok] of Vietnam's independent government [i.e., the DRV].

Other such letters were sent, 23 written in Vietnamese and one in Thai. After reading translations of these letters, Phibun ordered that it should be made known to everyone that Thailand had recognized the Bảo Đại government because it had received its independence from France, and Britain and the United States had already recognized it. After receiving the Prime Minister's order, the Foreign Ministry announced in early September that Thailand supported the democratic forces in the United Nations, and on this basis it had given its recognition to the Bảo Đại government.<sup>92</sup> Following this the acting Foreign Minister, Khemachat Bunyaratphan, submitted an opinion report addressed to the Cabinet Secretary:

The reason that the Foreign Ministry had to release its announcement was because Vietnamese living in Thailand had written letters addressed to the Thai government that showed they belong to the Việt Minh movement led by Hồ Chí Minh. This movement is the adversary of the Vietnam government [of Bảo Đại] which has friendly relations with Thailand. The original objective of the Việt Minh was to fight for Vietnam's independence. However, France has given Vietnam its independence, is promoting its autonomy; and its government has been recognized by the world's democracies. Meanwhile, this [Việt Minh] movement has been in close contact with the communist side, and has even been actively trying to bring about the realization of communism. Our country is fighting against communism, and is pursuing policies in co-operation with other democratic countries to prevent communism. However, these Vietnamese are using the opportunity of living in Thailand to carry on communist activities. They are collecting and send out weapons to their

<sup>90</sup> NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/12, pp. 4, 18, 29. Although Phibun argued for recognition, Foreign Minister Pote was opposed, saying it was premature. After the decision to grant recognition, Pote resigned as Foreign Minister; Luang Wichitwathakan, *Aran-ramluk* (Bangkok, 1950), pp. 4–5.

<sup>91</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

comrades in foreign countries, which clearly shows their intentions...If the situation in Vietnam grows tenser than it is now, it is possible that these Vietnamese will become involved in extremist acts that will disturb Thailand's domestic peace and order. Moreover, in the future, when we have exchanged diplomatic officials with the [Bảo Đại] government, there is a danger that Vietnamese diplomats could be harmed. When you [the Cabinet] take up the problem of the Vietnamese, we want you to take these points into consideration.

In response Phibun ordered Khemachat to submit the problem of the Vietnamese for immediate discussion in the Cabinet.<sup>93</sup>

These documents show that as the Cold War intensified with the October 1949 victory of the communist revolution in China and then the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Thailand's leadership decided to stick with the "democratic camp" of the US and Britain. They recognized the Bảo Đại government while greatly increasing their criticism of the Việt Minh communists. As communist strength grew in China, the Thai government turned to a policy of severely restricting the entry of Chinese into the country. Regarding the Vietnamese, by an order of the Interior Ministry dated 11 October 1949, they would no longer be allowed to flee from Indochina to Thailand, and the entry of Vietnamese into the country would henceforth be in accordance with immigration laws and regulations and a quota system would be applied. For Vietnamese already in the country who were temporary evacuees, 19 provinces were designated where they could reside—14 in the Northeast, three in the North, and two in the eastern part of the country. In August 1950 this was reduced to eight provinces, and Vietnamese living in other provinces were ordered to move to these eight.<sup>94</sup>

On 20 June 1951, Nguyễn Đức Quý and eight other members of the Delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Bangkok, following instructions from the Thai police, left the country aboard an airplane to Rangoon. Five years after the end of World War II and in the midst of the Cold War, the Việt Minh delegation in Bangkok had finally ceased to exist. On receiving this news from the Director-General of the Police Department, Phibun remarked that "the communists are creating trouble for all of the people; they should all be deported from the country," and he ordered the Police Department to continue investigating communists and their activities.<sup>95</sup> Nearly a year-and-a-half later, in November 1952, the government promulgated the Communist Activities Prevention Law.

Turning to the Lao Issara government-in-exile, which had moved to Bangkok after being driven out

---

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* Satcha Nophaphan, *Thurayuk bon thirapsung*, 1951, described the distress and misery of the Vietnamese evacuees who were forced to relocate in August 1950. This source also said that the Vietnamese were restricted to living in five provinces, not eight. At a Cabinet meeting on 29 April 1953, during a tense period when the Việt Minh were on the verge of occupying Luang Phrabang and in response to French appeals for the removal of the communist threat, it was decided to carry out the mass removal of Vietnamese males between the ages of 16 and 60 from Nongkhai and send them to Petchabun province. But the Vietnamese community strongly opposed this, and on 14 May the government cancelled the removal order (NAT, Mo. To.0201.2.1.14/18,23).

<sup>95</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.37.6/11.

of Vientiane in April 1946, Northeastern Thai political leaders kept up their support. After the loss of its base in Laos, Fong Sitthitham made plans to train a military force for the Issara by recruiting young men from the Thai Northeast and sending them to Yunnan for training under the KMT army in Kunming. In 1947 he contacted a former student of his from his days as a middle school teacher in Ubon. At the time, this student, Dr. Seng Pathumrat, was residing in the US where he had received a Ph.D. in education. Fong asked Seng to return to Thailand and help Laos in its struggle for independence. Fong called a meeting at his home in Bangkok to discuss how to further Lao independence. Among those at the meeting were Phon Saensaradi, Siphanom Phichitwarasan and Thim Phuriphat, a member of the House of Representatives<sup>96</sup> and the older brother of Thongin Phuriphat. The meeting decided to seek the assistance of the KMT government, and Seng along with Amphon Suwannabon were dispatched to Nanjing. The Chinese responded by agreeing to have young Thai from the Northeast and other members of the Lao Issara come to Yunnan for military training.<sup>97</sup>

By late 1947, however, the Bangkok government was picking up signs of suspicious recruiting activity by anti-government people in the Northeast. A document dated 2 December 1947 from the commander of the Third Military Region to the military Commander-in-Chief reported that

Phra Maha La Anurachawong from Vientiane, along with Amphon Suwannabon of Roi Et province have been recruiting people in Kuchinarai district of Kalasin province with exhortations harking back to the Anouvong rebellion in 1827 [when the last Lao vassal ruler of Vientiane had rebelled against Bangkok's authority and was eventually captured and put to death]. Many of the government officials in the provinces of Sakhon Nakhon and Kalasin support these anti-government people, and they are likely covering up the facts and not reporting them.<sup>98</sup>

The report reached the incorrect conclusion that people were being recruited for the armed overthrow of the post-coup government set up by the military. Unclear at the time, however, was that Phra Maha La Anurachawong mentioned in the report was in the midst of recruiting young men in that part of the Northeast to be sent for military training in China. This fact was revealed in an interrogation report of a youth who had gone to China for training and had been arrested after returning to Thailand in 1953.<sup>99</sup> Together these documents offer clear evidence that by the latter half of 1947, Fong

<sup>96</sup> Born in 1902, Thim was a minister-without-portfolio in 1958 in the cabinet of Thanom Kittikachon.

<sup>97</sup> Siphanom Phichitwarasan's recollection in *Cremation Volume for Fong Sitthitham*, pp. 50–55. Fong had close connections with the KMT in Bangkok. He also translated Sun Yat Sen's *Three Principles of the People* and published it on 28 August 1947. Worth noting is his advocacy of nationalism in the preface of this translation in connection with the Lao Issara movement. According to Siphanom, because of the Northeast's poverty, Fong and many of the other political leaders from that region in the House of Representatives took a great interest in Sun Yat Sen's ideas and his concept of socialism (author's interview with Siphanom Phichitwarasan on 5 January 1998).

<sup>98</sup> NAT, So.Ro.0201.32/14.

<sup>99</sup> The case of Pherm Phumseri is mentioned in a 20 August 1953 report to the Cabinet from Phao Sriyanon, Director-General of the Police Department. Pherm (born 1920) from Kuchinarai District, Kalasin, had been recruited by Phra Maha LaAnuwong and sent to Kunming for military training after which he returned to Thailand (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.77/29).

and other Northerners were gathering recruits to be sent to China for military training. Siphanom Phichitwarasan recalled that

Member of the House of Representatives Thim Phuriphat was at the center of the recruiting of youths. Tiang Sirikhan, Thongin Phuriphat and two other people who were former Cabinet ministers were afraid that the government would suspect them [of involvement in military training to overthrow the coup group], and they distanced themselves from the work of sending young recruits to China. The recruits traveled overland from Northern Thailand. After sending them off, Dr. Seng Pathumrat and Amphon Suwannabon flew to Hong Kong, then went to meet the recruits in Kunming. Only a few groups of recruits had been sent when Fong was arrested on suspicion that he intended to lead a separatist [Northeast Thai] rebellion and become the Prime Minister of Laos.<sup>100</sup>

This recollection is consistent with police interrogation reports on youths who were arrested and investigated after returning to Thailand from training in China. Groups of young men were sent to Kunming overland from Northern Thailand in mid-1948.<sup>101</sup> According to Siphanom a total of about 150 youths<sup>102</sup> were sent, all recruited from Northeastern Thailand and none from Laos. At that time the Lao Issara had a military force under the command of Prince Souphanouvong (1909–1995) made up of about 1000 Lao fighters along with a small number of people from Northeastern Thailand. This force was deployed in small units of a couple of dozen men along the Mekong on the Thai side of the river from Chiang Saeng in the north to Ubon in the southeast from where they carried out guerrilla attacks into Lao territory. As an advisor to the Lao Issara military, Siphanom was in charge of procuring supplies and equipment. Siphanom also agreed with Prince Phetsarath that upon achieving independence for Laos, they would lead Northeastern Thai in a migration to under-populated Laos.<sup>103</sup>

Suspecting that recruiting people for military training in China was part of a plan by Northeastern Thai separatists to build up military strength for overthrowing the Thai government and building a greater Laos, on 1 November 1948 the Bangkok authorities arrested Fong Sitthitham, Thim Phuriphat, and numerous other Northeastern Thai political leaders for plotting a separatist revolt. That these leaders did harbor some sort of idea of a unified Laos and Northeast Thailand (although whether as a confederation or as a greater Laos remained unclear) can also be inferred from Thim's words when he was arrested. Having labored hard to recruit people for training in China, he said, "If the idea of trying to

---

<sup>100</sup> Siphanom Phichitwarasan's recollection in *Cremation Volume for Fong Sitthitham*, pp. 50–55.

<sup>101</sup> NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.77/29.

<sup>102</sup> Thai government documentation says 60 youths were sent to Kunming (NAT, (2) So.Ro.0201.77/29).

<sup>103</sup> Author's interviews with Siphanom Phichitwarasan on 5 November 1997 and 5 January 1998. In Bangkok Siphanom developed a close friendship with Phetsarath, who told him that Laos did not need territory, but that its population was too small and he (Phetsarath) wanted only people.

unite the Thai peoples on the other side of the Mekong is illegal, then put me in jail till I die.”<sup>104</sup> Eventually, after the communist Chinese took control of Yunnan, the recruits sent for training in Kunming separated into those who joined the Lao forces under Souphanouvong and those who returned to Thailand (30 men).<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, “Prince Souphanouvong, because of his preference for communism, his submission to Việt Minh orders, and particularly because of his concurrence with plans to let armed military forces advance into Laos from across the China–Burma border, was expelled from the Lao Issara movement on 15 May 1949.”<sup>106</sup>

In Paris two months later, on 19 July, the President of France as the leader of the French Union and King Sisavangvong of Laos signed an agreement recognizing the independence of Laos within the French Union. This independence was only partial as the agreement gave France authority over Lao defense, diplomatic and financial affairs. Nevertheless, a majority of the Issara government-in-exile in Bangkok saw independence as having been achieved and hoped to join the king's royal government of Laos. Representatives of the two governments met in Bangkok for negotiations mediated by the French commissioner to the Kingdom of Laos and the French ambassador to Thailand. These led to the dissolution of the Issara government-in-exile and the Issara movement itself, which was announced on 24 October 1949.<sup>107</sup> Following the end of the Lao Issara, Phetsarath chose to remain in Bangkok rather than return to Vientiane.

---

<sup>104</sup> *Phapkhao Sayamnikhom*, no. 20, Nov 1948, p. 15.

<sup>105</sup> In the 20 August 1953 report to the Cabinet from Phao; also author's interviews with Siphanom Phichiwarasan on 5 November 1997 and 5 January 1998.

<sup>106</sup> Lao government announcement reported by the Thai legation in Vientiane in a communiqué dated 4 May 1953 (NAT, (3) So.Ro.0201.9/4).

<sup>107</sup> Document concerning the “Dissolution of the Lao Issara Government-in-Exile,” dated 30 November 1949, from Foreign Minister Pote Sarasin to the Prime Minister (*ibid.*). In October 1953 the Royal Government of Laos and France concluded an agreement giving Laos complete independence.